In Portland, Ore., Urban Decay Is Masked by Natural Splendor

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PORTLAND, Ore.—Doctors bury their mistakes, architects plant vines, and Portland covers them with roses. June is rose festival time in this city of 375,000 people, where green residential hills drop down to the commercial core with a 10-minute transition from panoramic views to compact urban center. Small-scale, comfortably pedestrian streets with a cosmopolitan architectural mix are bounded by the hills on the west and the Willamette River on the east, with spreading residential and industrial areas beyond that double the metropolitan population.

An Appraisal

If one looks up from the city streets, snow-capped peaks seem painted on a cyclorama sky. Ringing the heights are nine miles of parks, including wilderness areas of giant firs; 35 miles of rustic foot trails will eventually start close to the downtown civic center.

This is dreamworld urbanism; a city blessed by nature and by man. It is so lovely that Portlanders are lulled by its beauty into a kind of false security about its urban health.

There is a curious apathy to signs of disruption and environmental change. The spoilers are already here. The scattered, bomb-site look of downtown parking lots made by demolishing older buildings that pay less than metered asphalt, and the blocks given over totally to parking garages or a combination of open lot and garage, are destroying the cohesive character of the city as decisively as a charge of dynamite wherever they occur. Sixty per cent of city ground is now covered by automobiles.

Portland has urban renewal in the shiny, scaleless, Chamber-of-Commerce-image, and a better-than-average assortment of the Anywhere, U.S.A., products of the large, national, big-city architectural firms, with their interchangeable towers and plazas multiplying a slick, redundant formula.

Shopping Center Trend

Across the river, the trend to suburban shopping centers that demagnetizes downtown has begun. Inadequate public transportation is accompanied by rising fares. There are battles over whether apartment houses should be allowed on the hills among the single family homes, and how to save landmarks from rising land values and neighborhoods from an expanding in-town university. Everything is not coming up roses.

But there is, over it all, a false bloom of health. For proof, Portlanders point to their new skyline, with close to a dozen dramatic towers vying in height: a Hilton Hotel, 23 stories and 224 feet, the three clustered apartment towers of the downtown urban renewal project, reaching 25 stories and 240 feet, and the Bank of California at 268 feet, all topped, for the moment, by the massive Georgia Pacific building. This neatly extravagant Unistyle commercial model by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, considered suitable for use by any major corporation in any American city, with soap sculpture on the inevitable plaza, rises to 375 feet.

It is about to be topped, in turn, at 536 feet, by the First National Bank of Oregon, designed by Charles Luckman Associates of Los Angeles. This tower will be tapered and tailfinned, with an accessory block-square box, in a manner that finally died unmourned in Detroit, but that the Southern California sun seems to keep alive. In style, scale and impact it will be alien corn, in every sense of the word.

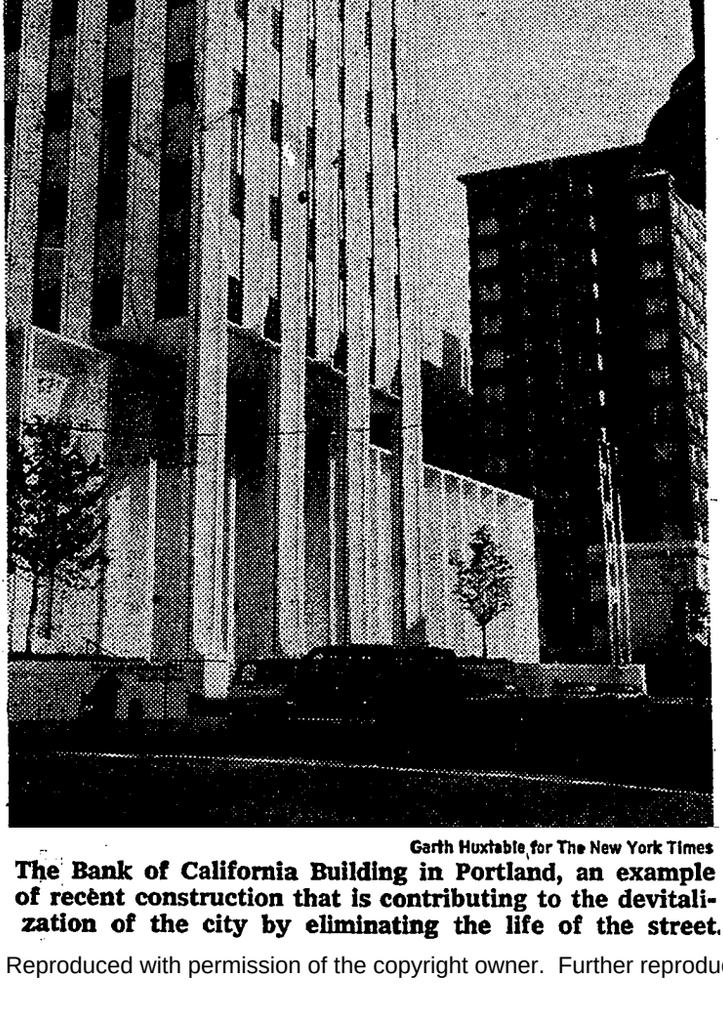
According to the architect's publicist, it will rise "40 stories into the air, a towering challenge to Mount Hood." Against the Suave Schlock of some of Portland's current California architectural imports, Mount Hood doesn't stand a chance.

How It Is Down Below

No one has stopped looking at the tops of these buildings long enough to see what is happening on the ground. Each one is contributing to the devitalization of the city. Virtually all of them eliminate the life of the street. There is nothing on each square block on which these buildings rise — where there should be windows, shops, pedestrian attractions and activities — but a corporate entrance and a parking garage.

This deadly design usually employs the most foolproof city-wrecking device ever adopted by architects, for which today's practitioners must surely be called to account. It is the tower on an elevated plaza, or podium, one floor above ground level, which puts a concrete or marble bunker on the street —a blind, insolent, formidable fortress raised against pedestrian humanity. It lacks only gun emplacements, and its friendliest function is to receive cars.

The Bank of California Building even put a fountain below grade in its garage at the incongruous corner where cars turn around it onto the exit ramp, a switch Bernini never dreamed of. In the age



Garth Huxtable for The New York Times

The Bank of California Building in Portland, an example of recent construction that is contributing to the devitalization of the city by eliminating the life of the street.

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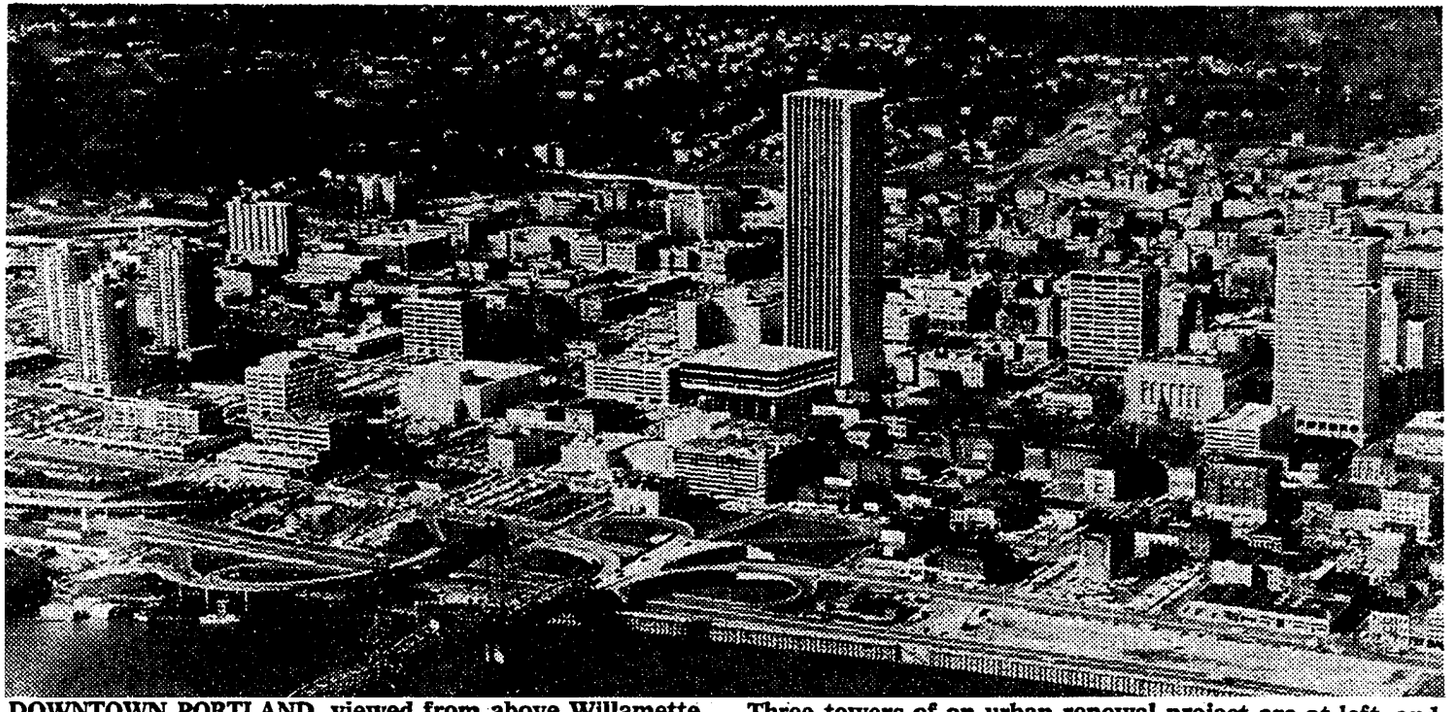

DOWNTOWN PORTLAND, viewed from above Willamette River, on center's eastern edge. Rendering of the First National Bank of Oregon is superimposed at center. Three towers of an urban renewal project are at left, and the Georgia Pacific Building, 375 feet high, is at right. Bank tower, to rise 536 feet, will be tapered and tailfinned.

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of the automobile, it has a kind of ludicrous logic.

The new Portland, then, consists largely of towers, bunkers and bomb sites. And the mathematics have not yet been devised that will dispose of all the cars that the working population of each new skyscraper brings. For the block-square Georgia Pacific Building, for example, there is another "lost" half-block of parking garage constructed by the corporation and it barely does the job.

But the mathematics of the new development are eminently satisfactory to anyone who has a piece of the financial action. All this corporate splendor is going up on land being assembled at what is still a bargain rate of $25 a square foot for prime, core-city blocks.

Law of Real Estate

First National's two-block site consists of one block at that price, and a second block at $20 a square foot purchased from the city's urban renewal area, an even better deal. The values are good enough to bring investors from as far as Honolulu.

The laws of real estate, which are as inexorable as the tides, dictate that as land is improved, in real estate parlance, with new construction, the values go up, as does the price of all the land around. This is fine for the investors and the corporate builders and the city's tax base, if not for more traditional urban values. In the city-sponsored urban renewal area alone, the tax base has increased by 1500 per cent. You can't tell any city where expenses outstrip revenues that this is bad.

Portland's downtown renewal has been bulldozer redevelopment. It eliminated what the Portland Development Commission considered a messy residential-commercial-industrial mix in a marginal neighborhood. Because the work has spanned the decade from 1958 to 1968, with some later use of rehabilitation planned for an extension of the original area, Portland was able to learn from the most desolate early mistakes of other cities. Opinions on the necessity and efficacy of the relocation process vary.

Whatever the debatable sociology of the project, the esthetic results are judged as some of the best in the country. The apartment towers by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill are handsome, and there is heavy emphasis on public and pedestrian malls. Some of the credit must go to the climate, as well as to the landscaping, which promotes the kind of fresh, lush growth without which the plan could be noticeably sterile.

The project is brought to life by Lovejoy Park—Lawrence Halprin's fountain-plaza, which is the area's social center and a notable work of environmental space and sculpture. A larger edition is almost finished as a forecourt for the city's neuter auditorium.

But the renewal area's buildings and spaces are a curiously unsettling compromise of urban scale and density for the center city that it adjoins, where the scale is as felicitous as the buildings are haphazard.

One turn for relief and instruction to Portland's "park streets" of the late 19th century, landscaped strip parks that work better within the city's module than the new superblocks. They are now being lined by another sure-fire city destroyer, the depersonalized institutional construction of Portland State College—aided by urban renewal.

What is left of "old" Portland, a city founded in 1844, can be seen in the Skidmore Fountain area near the river, where a handful of Victorian commercial buildings are protected by fierce citizen determination and a special design district designation.

The remains are noticeably gap-toothed with parkings lots, often where other structures of the same vintage have been removed. Portland also has some of the most beautifully detailed and dignified early 20th-century classical revival buildings in the country, which add Roman richness to the decimated streets.

But someday, some American city will discover the Mathusian truth that the greater the number of automobiles, the less the city can accommodate them without destroying itself.

The downtown that turns itself into a parking lot is speeding its own dissolution.

The price for Portland is already alarmingly high. But there are no easy answers, or no American city would be in trouble.