

Portland's streetcar architecture -- past becomes future

Posted by [evhu](#) June 10, 2009 17:00PM



Fredrick D. Joe/The Oregonian

This building, an example of streetcar-style architecture, is nearly completed on North Mississippi Avenue between Failing and Beech streets.

Portland's future and its past intersect at 28th Avenue and East Burnside.

A hundred feet or so from an old red brick trolley barn -- long since converted to offices -- workers are constructing an eye-catching, four-story condo with ground-floor retail.

Stunning as it is with its protruding, stucco-boxed balconies, the Sunrose Condominiums traces its pedigree right back to the trolley barn era. A century ago, many buildings on commercial streets served by streetcars were built with storefronts flush to the sidewalks and with one or two stories of apartments or offices above.

Today, planners call these structures mixed-use buildings with ground-floor retail, but many historians and architects call them something else: streetcar architecture. Today's versions may be taller and clad with modern materials, but the concept is the same. They add human density and retail services on streets served by public transit.



Fredrick D. Joe/The Oregonian [Randy Rapaport, shown at Little T American Baker, developed and lives in The Clinton, on Southeast Division. Hosford-Abernethy neighborhood residents objected to the building's height, and Rapaport says if he had to do it all over again, he would take neighborhood concerns more into account. "You should pay attention to scale, but still reach the streetcar sensibility," he says.](#)

"It's interesting that we're seeing them come back," says Carl Abbott, a Portland State University planning and urban studies professor. While planners map out details for a modest east side streetcar loop that will open in 2011, the east side's original streetcar arterials such as Hawthorne, Belmont, Alberta and Mississippi are flourishing with the new generation of streetcar buildings.

The first heyday of streetcar architecture was 1900 to 1925. "The classic size was two and three stories," Abbott says. "Now we're getting five and six stories, if you look at what's happening on North Mississippi and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. It's the same, but it's also different. It's higher density than we had 75 or 100 years ago."

These days, the units above are often condos rather than apartments. They appeal to buyers who like urban services nearby and who are less tied down by possessions.

"The idea of an alternative lifestyle isn't so alternative anymore," says Randy Rapaport, who lives in The Clinton, a building he developed on Southeast Division.

"I'd rather walk or bike than drive. I want to exercise while living, rather than going to a gym. I like the idea of living close in. I'm amazed at how pervasive bike lanes are on the east side. It doesn't take long to get almost anywhere when you're living close in."

Jeff Stuhr, a partner in Holst Architecture, the firm that has designed two streetcar-type buildings on the east side, including the Sunrose, describes what he calls "parallel universes" on the old streetcar routes.

"If you look at Morrison, Belmont, Hawthorne or Division, you can almost chart the distance between the old streetcar stops," he says. "Where there was a stop there was a concentration of services on the ground floor, with living units or offices above. That was a nexus of transportation. From that came these pockets of more intense developments.



Fredrick D. Joe/The OregonianA student's drawing depicts the Sunlan Lighting building, an example of streetcar architecture, on North Mississippi Avenue -- and the drawing is displayed along with others in the shop's front window. Fourth-graders from Boise-Eliot Elementary School made scale drawings such as these during a six-week project with Architects in Schools. Architect Tim Ganey from the Mahlum architecture firm volunteered to work with the students.

"You get these similarities street by street, but each one has its own flavor," Stuhr says.

As Portland slowly rebuilds a streetcar system -- now roughly 4 miles -- it's hard to imagine that in 1919 the city had 197 miles of trolley tracks.

Portland's hodgepodge of streetcar lines was built by real estate developers to ferry customers and residents to new neighborhoods such as Laurelhurst, Irvington, Sunnyside and Piedmont. But ridership plummeted after the rise of automobiles in the late 1920s and '30s.

"As the city expanded out into suburbs, these areas fell into blight and were overlooked for many years," Stuhr says. "Portland is blessed that we still have remnants intact. So many cities just wiped them out with urban renewal."

Stuhr says the renaissance started in the late 1980s on Northwest 23rd Avenue, where old tracks still lurk under the asphalt. "A lot of these east side neighborhoods came to the party a little later."

Unlike many cities, Portland has used its zoning code to encourage housing-above-retail on commercial arterials since the mid-1980s. "Housing supports the commercial and helps make for a more vibrant street," says Tim Heron, a senior planner in the city's Bureau of Development Services.

Developers seemed reluctant to make the leap at first. On the east side, the catalyst proved to be an old brick dairy building on Southeast Belmont. In 1996, Zupan's moved an upscale grocery into the ground floor of what became the Belmont Dairy Lofts, while the second-floor apartments with high ceilings rented quickly.

"Here was a situation where people really did yearn to get back into a neighborhood and be close to restaurants and stores and coffee shops and that sense of community," Stuhr says. "It grew from there. Each project helped the next."

The revival of rail transit, streetcar architecture and neighborhoods where residents can walk to stores, schools and parks are tenets of an urban planning philosophy called New Urbanism, which Portland planners have largely embraced. If successful, Portland of the future could look much like Portland of 1915.

Portland wins lots of plaudits among the New Urbanism proponents with the advent of MAX, Portland Streetcar and higher-density housing adjacent to transit lines.

But critics such as Randal O'Toole, a former Portlander and policy analyst for the Cato Institute, a free-market think tank, contends that Portland's planning has driven up housing costs and increased traffic congestion. Despite the city's heavy investment in transit, he says driving patterns have changed little. In a 2007 article called, "Debunking Portland, the City that Doesn't Work," he noted that transit-oriented housing didn't succeed without parking.

Most people, O'Toole believes, would rather have a single-family house on a piece of land.

Stacey Nelson, a condo broker who lives in a new, mixed-use building in Hollywood, says smaller condo buildings appeal to young professionals as well as older people downsizing. He says many buyers feel they have more control over decisions affecting their buildings than condo owners in big towers. "There really is a community spirit," he says.

As Portland launches an update of its comprehensive plan this year, Heron says it is unlikely the City Council will back away from zoning that encourages high-density housing along major transit streets, whether the transit be streetcars or buses.

If there is any controversy, it might be over building sizes on neighborhood commercial streets.

"On North Mississippi the old buildings are all two stories, and then suddenly at the north and south ends there are these much larger buildings, four and six stories," says Abbott, the urban studies professor. "In terms of the city's long-term goals of using infrastructure more intensively and post-peak-oil strategy, it makes a lot of sense. But it is taking it to a new scale."

Rapaport, the developer, agrees that scale is an issue. Residents of the Hosford-Abernethy neighborhood objected to four stories at his Clinton condos. "If I had it to do over, maybe it would be three instead of four," he says. "I'd be more sensitive to the neighborhood the next time around. You should pay attention to scale, but still reach the streetcar sensibility."

By 2015, a new Willamette River bridge for streetcars and MAX could allow streetcars to run continuous loops around the central city. The Portland Bureau of Transportation is working with residents and planners to consider new streetcar routes that would radiate from the loop. Some candidates, such as Southeast Belmont and Northeast Sandy, saw streetcars once before.

Should that happen again, streetcar buildings will be waiting.



Federal help brings streetcars to east side

After a hiatus of roughly 60 years, streetcars will return to Portland's east side late in 2011.

A decision by the Federal Transit Administration last month to contribute \$75 million to a \$147 million funding package will bring the Portland Streetcar across the Broadway Bridge and down a near-eastside corridor that includes the Rose Quarter, Lloyd District, Central Eastside Industrial District and OMSI.

The 3.3-mile loop will include 28 stops, pared down from an earlier concept with 34. Carter MacNichol, construction manager with Shiels Oblatz Johnsen, a private development firm, said fewer stops will slightly increase overall streetcar speeds.

The project represents a new attitude about streetcars in Washington, D.C. The Bush administration had set up insurmountable standards to qualify for federal funds, trolley proponents say.

"This is a welcome change from five months ago," MacNichol says. "It's a welcome change not only for Portland but for the rest of the country."

About 60 other cities have given consideration to urban streetcars after Portland opened its first 2.4-mile leg in 2001.

It's also good news for United Streetcar, a subsidiary of Oregon Iron Works, which will build new Portland streetcars. The firm also has landed a contract to build cars for Tucson, Ariz., and could win additional contracts as the only American streetcar manufacturer to date.

One challenge awaiting MacNichol's team is preparing the Broadway Bridge for streetcar tracks. Heavy vehicles cause some jiggle on the bridge deck. Planners need to make sure that tracks and overhead wires still line up, despite movement. "They did it before," MacNichol says, referring to streetcars that used the bridge decades ago. "I guess we can figure it out again."

Categories:

Comments

tombdragon says...

The denser the population the less desirable it is for me and my family, to live "close-in". Living "close-in" is made even more undesirable because of the greater dependence on government, and the emphases on political policy and legislated encroachment by others.

Posted on 06/10/09 at 6:57PM

laurelwood says...

tombdragon: Move to Idaho with the other right wing nuts.

Posted on 06/10/09 at 7:28PM

tombdragon says...

laurelwood - If you cannot take the time to LISTEN to your neighbors, and not pave over what they value, then you leave! Your very attitude is the reason government is unreliable at providing services because it already provides more than WE can afford. Defend your view, your statement is indefensible and narrow minded. I've probably lived here longer than you have, why don't you move.

Posted on 06/10/09 at 11:48PM

fejman says...

Living "close-in" is made even more undesirable because of the greater dependence on government"

Huh? How are you more dependent on government by living close-in?

Posted on 06/11/09 at 2:51AM

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