

TERM PROJECT OVERVIEW

Transforming Space and Enhancing the PSU District Community

The purpose of this project is to link theory with research to examine opportunities to enrich the built environment of the PSU community. This term research will focus on two significant open spaces and the connections between them: the PSU Park Blocks and the Halprin Open Space Sequence which form the eastern edge of campus. Based on the findings of their research, students will collaborate to devise frameworks for the development of particular settings; and individually propose low-cost, high-impact interventions to transform those spaces and strengthen a sense of community. Proposals might include physical design, a social event, an educational workshop, public sculpture or performance art ... use your imagination!

POLICY CONTEXT: PSU is a growing public research institution situated at the center of the largest urban region in Oregon. PSU's campus does not exist in ivory tower isolation; it is deeply enmeshed in the surrounding neighborhood, city, metro region and state, as well as national and international networks. In today's knowledge-based global economy universities are important catalysts for innovation and economic growth. PSU and the City of Portland are creating inter-related plans to encourage the further development of PSU as a learning and research community and center for social, cultural and economic vitality. These plans are based on urban design principles that correspond closely to those presented in *Design for Ecological Democracy*, by Randolph Hester. In addition to Hester's text, we will refer as a resource to PSU's Framework Plan [<http://www.pdx.edu/planning-sustainability/university-district-framework-plan>] which is coordinated with Portland's Central City Plan, currently being updated, <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/61672>

BACKGROUND: Portland State occupies most of 50 city blocks southwest of downtown Portland. This area, today known as the University District, was first settled in the late 1800s predominantly by Italian and Jewish immigrants, as part of the settlement of South Portland. The downtown Park Blocks of Portland's original street layout extended into this neighborhood, which at the turn of the century was mainly residential with large mansions mixed with smaller homes. By the 1920s, as Portland's population grew, wealthy residents moved further west and the mansions gave way to apartment buildings and commercial and civic enterprises.

PSU, then a community college, moved into this neighborhood in 1952, into buildings vacated by Lincoln High School. Founded in 1946 in Vanport, PSU's move downtown was precipitated by the Vanport flood of 1948. In 1955 the Oregon Legislature granted the school four-year college status. In 1958, the new Portland State College approached the (also new) Portland Development Commission (PDC) to utilize urban renewal funding earmarked for universities to acquire land to expand the campus. The Portland State Urban Renewal project, approved in 1964, called for demolition of all non-college structures and the relocation of hundreds of households and dozens of businesses. A major part of the project was the redesign of the six Park Blocks between SW Park and 9th Avenue and SW Mill and College Street, to create a more viable area for the campus and residents. This redevelopment sparked the growth of Portland State College—in programs, faculty and students—which attained full university status in 1969.

Concurrently, Portland's first experiment in urban renewal project was radically transforming the eastern portion of this neighborhood, designated the South Auditorium area, as it included Civic (now Keller) Auditorium. City leaders viewed this area—which had suffered from the flight to

the suburbs—as “blighted and economically isolated.” Nevertheless the neighborhood still housed numerous delis, bars, and shops and a diverse ethnic community of Greek, Irish and Roma immigrants. For the South Auditorium Urban Renewal project PDC acquired 54 blocks and relocated over a thousand residents and hundreds of businesses. By 1963 all the land was cleared for redevelopment as modern office buildings, apartments, and retail. The new buildings, all in the modern style of the day, were connected by a series of pedestrian pathways, fountains and plazas designed by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin. Architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable hailed the final plaza in the series—Forecourt Fountain (now Ira Keller Fountain)—as “the most important urban space since the Renaissance.” In 2013 the entire Halprin Open Space Sequence was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK: The *Central City Plan* recognizes the PSU campus centered on the South Park Blocks and the South Auditorium area centered on the Halprin Open Space Sequence as two unique urban places that together with RiverPlace comprise the South Downtown/University District. The preliminary plan for this district calls for improvements to the public realm and open spaces, to make them “more accessible, usable and engaging spaces for the community,” and to encourage pedestrian activity within and between them.

Likewise *PSU’s District Framework Plan* proposes “**a new model of urban development that is neither city nor campus but a unique fusion of the two.** Boundaries between public and private are blurred; uses are not only mixed, but shared; and a transparency, making the academic and social life of the University visible to all....Within the University District, the blending of city and campus creates a vibrant urban environment. ... Active uses and transparency on the street level connect buildings to the city, integrating indoor and outdoor spaces.” Furthermore the District Framework Plan envisions a future of the University and its surroundings in which the Park Blocks anchor a major focal point for early redevelopment.

TERM PROJECT FOCUS: With this vision in mind, Campus Planning Staff is interested in strengthening the Park Blocks as a center of the campus community and in improving connections between the campus and the Halprin Open Space Sequence which forms its eastern edge. They welcome your assistance in investigating how to build up activity in and between these two significant open spaces, and how to leverage their creative potential as a framework for continuous experiment in and development of the hybrid urban campus district. Campus Planning staff will provide an orientation and attend your final presentations.

Three inter-related assignments involve both individual and collaborative work:

Assignment 1. Field Observation: Physical Traces (Individual)

Research using observation of physical traces as a method for systematically looking at the existing setting to find reflections of previous activity. The aim is to observe a familiar place from a new perspective; to document and analyze these observations; and, based on this analysis, to develop insights for further investigation in Assignment 2.

Assignment 2. Field Observation: User Behavior (Individual + Team)

Research using digital video as a method for exploring how people use the existing setting and how they adapt it to suit their needs. Individual observations will be analyzed by the team and key findings will be mapped and presented in an edited ten-minute video. Based on this analysis identify opportunities for interventions in Assignment 3.

Assignment 3. IPlace-Making Proposal (Individual + Team)

Teams collaboratively devise conceptual frameworks for the incremental development of particular settings. Within this framework individuals propose low-cost, high-impact interventions to transform those spaces and strengthen a sense of community.