

UNIVERSITY PLAZA THE URBAN CENTER

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The Urban
Center,
Portland State
University



facilities, along with extensive residential development, to create a more active urban environment. These findings reinforced PSU's overall University District Plan – the primary goal of which was to transform the university environs into a vibrant urban neighborhood – and called for building 1,500 new housing units in the area. The Urban Center building and University Plaza were viewed as key amenities for galvanizing future residential development and would

AT A GLANCE Project Type:

Urban amenity for new front door to south downtown area

Location:

Between SW Mill and Montgomery Streets, and SW Fifth and Sixth Avenues

Developer:

Portland State University

Owner:

Portland State University

Designers:

Thomas Hacker, architecture

Walker-Macy, landscape architecture

Portland Development Commission

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Background

The Urban Center and University Plaza at Portland State University (PSU) are part of a six-block redevelopment area east of PSU's main campus that will eventually include a mix of commercial, residential, retail, and institutional development. The Urban Center complex will house the College of Urban and Public Affairs, plus retail and commercial space. This redevelopment program implements several large-scale planning efforts spearheaded by PSU. Although the six-block redevelopment area is located within the South Park Blocks urban renewal district, it had never attracted the intensive commercial and residential development that had been built in other parts of the district. Unlike other city neighborhoods with nearby amenities, like those close to the park blocks or waterfront, this south downtown area lacked major urban amenities to draw residential development.

In 1994, PSU secured a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to undertake a master plan study for this six block area that had been passed over by the urban renewal redevelopment sweeps of the 1960s and 1970s. The master plan called for improved retail and transit

serve as a new front door to PSU.

Meanwhile, plans for running the proposed South/North light rail extension to PSU were in the works. With the busiest transit stop in the state, PSU draws more than 5 million visitors annually; some 30% take transit. Tri-Met, the city's transit operator, was also looking to extend the bus Transit Mall (along 5th and 6th Avenues) further south to the university campus.

An oversight executive committee with representatives from PSU, Tri-Met, and the city's Bureau of Planning was formed to guide development for the Urban Center complex. An intergovernmental agreement between the three entities was drawn up to formalize the partnership. The Portland Development Commission (PDC) subsequently teamed up with Tri-Met on the plaza development, that would be part of a major transportation hub.

Development & Construction

The Urban Center complex is on the site of the old Greyhound Bus station building, that was occupied later by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. The Urban Center building, approximately 131,000 square feet in size, was designed to look like several smaller buildings. The main seven-story east wing will house the

College of Urban and Public Affairs, along with the PSU bookstore on the ground floor and a number of food tenants in the basement. An information center on the ground floor, to be jointly operated by PSU and Tri-Met, will sell bus and rail passes, as well as tickets to PSU events. The Long Distance Learning Center, – a two-way audio-visual classroom that receives and sends educational programs to remote areas around the state – will be located in the three-story west wing.

Because of specific requirements of the different funding sources, the development was divided into three distinct construction projects with different contractors managing each separate piece. For example, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Agency, which financed the Long Distance Learning Center, required that wage rates for contractors (on the west wing segment) follow federal guidelines of the Davis Bacon Act. The complex was divided into the following three construction projects: 1. east wing – College of Urban and Public Affairs; 2. west wing – Long Distance Learning Center; and 3. plaza. Tri-Met managed the construction of University Plaza and PDC contributed funds to the plaza construction.

Using a video camera to record the construction around the clock, PSU provided photographs of the construction site on the World Wide Web at: www.pdx.edu/urban_center_construction_zone.

Planning & Design

The Urban Center building/plaza complex was designed as a new front door to PSU. Thus, the decisions to locate the university book store and information center within the complex were made partly to call attention to PSU so the university would be more visible in south downtown. The roughly 30,000-square-foot plaza is comparable in size to Downtown Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square; but the two plazas function very differently. Pioneer Courthouse Square, a popular site for large performances and cultural events, is a regional destination place. The University Plaza space is less monolithic and was designed as a central gathering place for the neighborhood.

The project architects envision the plaza as a "crucible of churning activity." The open-air farmers' market will probably move from downtown's South Park Blocks to University Plaza. The plaza area, which is located on Montgomery Street – a main pedestrian pathway that connects the waterfront to the park

blocks – will also function as a major transit hub. Many people will cross the plaza on their way to and from downtown or to catch the bus on the transit mall.

Transportation issues drove the initial plaza design. Tri-Met engineers had aligned the proposed South/North light rail extension diagonally through the Urban Center site. This diagonal rail alignment inspired the circular plaza design, which involved closing a section of Montgomery Street. Although voters defeated the light rail extension in 1998, plans are now being considered to build a streetcar line that would follow the same diagonal alignment through the plaza. The plaza will function as the southern terminus of the Transit Mall that will extend to the PSU campus.

City planning policy supports Portland's tight street grid and discourages superblocks. Thus, staff with the city's Bureau of Planning initially challenged the concept of closing Montgomery Street to create the plaza. Plaza designers surmounted this objection by showing that the plaza would invite pedestrian circulation and would function as a public open space; not as a private enclave for the university community.

Relating the building design to the plaza was an additional design challenge. As viewed from the street, the Urban Center building with its formal brick facade built out to the property line, blends in with the surrounding campus buildings. On the facade that faces the plaza, the architects designed oversized windows so the building appears more transparent, less massive and, consequently, more open and inviting. This transparent design, that exposes the internal building structure, makes it easy to "read" the building from the outside. Individuals standing in the plaza can see the locations for the stairwell and elevator and thus know where to go before entering the building.

Art Program

A 15-member art advisory committee was assembled to select artwork for University Plaza. A hefty budget of \$225,000 – the city's largest public art commission since Raymond Kaskey's sculpture "Portlandia" on the Portland Building – drew more than 150 submissions. The winning design by London-based sculptor John Aiken consists of two large granite sculptures that cast a series of smaller shadow sculptures imbedded flat in the pavement. The five or six elliptical-shaped shadows in textured granite will be sprinkled throughout the plaza. The large sculptures – rugged and irregular –

evoke the hills and jagged mountains of the Oregon landscape in contrast to the controlled precision of the cityscape.

Primary Funding Sources for University Plaza:

Portland Development Commission

Federal Transit Administration

Tri-Met

The total cost for the plaza design and construction was \$5 million.

Experience Gained

■ The series of partnerships and different funding sources complicated the project and lengthened the development/construction process. At the same time, these partnerships brought access to other funding sources that, otherwise, might not have been available. For example, Tri-Met's involvement in developing the plaza as well as the Transit Mall extension brought access to funding from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). FTA is funding much of the costs for construction of the plaza and also paying for streetfront improvements associated with the Transit Mall extension – ornamental lighting and street furniture, for example.

■ Planning on a broad, comprehensive scale empowered PSU staff to achieve specific goals on a smaller scale. The plaza element in this south section of downtown had not been envisioned in earlier planning documents, like the 1972 Downtown Plan or 1988 Central City Plan. Moreover, Portland planning policy has long discouraged superblocks, that tend to disrupt the city's 200-foot-long-block grid. To support the plaza concept, PSU planning staff looked to the earlier masterplan study they had undertaken for the six-block area surrounding the urban complex. The study recommended creating open space urban amenities to spur residential development in the area. PSU planners also showed that University Plaza – which would provide a new gateway to south downtown – would complement emerging development activity in the River District and Union Station, the downtown's new north gateway.

Schedule

Planning started:	1995
RFQ issued:	1996
Construction started:	June, 1998
Construction completed:	January, 2000