
Reviewed by William Toll

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Carl Abbott's assessment of the relationship between landscape, economy, cultural communities, and the formation of public policies in Portland, Oregon is the second in a projected series of scholarly yet accessible "Metropolitan Portraits". The brief volumes are to examine how historic images and contemporary needs shape the way citizens "rework" the inherited land to resolve conflicts deriving from the city's relationship with its region. Portland, of course, is the perfect subject for an early volume in such a series. It thrives in a glorious natural setting: heavily wooded mountain ranges to the east and west, the Columbia "rolling on" as Portland's northern border, steep slopes forming the city's western ridgeline, and the Willamette River bringing farming riches from the south as it bisects the city. Such a dramatic topography almost requires Abbott to move beyond the conventional narrative of urban growth to showcase the city through its regional interdependence, a context for urban history pioneered by Richard White in The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River and William Cronon in Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West.

Portlanders have been acutely aware of their dependence on regional resources for their livelihoods. In a brief introduction to the city's "Personality," Abbott explains how contemporary policy perspectives have been shaped by a fairly simple, linear relationship to the region's past as a timber, wheat, and wool-processing city. Having avoided the turmoil of disinvestment suffered by large industrial cities, a younger generation of articulate leadership since the 1970s has had the comparative leisure of slow growth to create a new civic culture. Government has nurtured a coalition of center city business interests and neighborhood groups around an ideology of environmental sensitivity that also protects downtown and neighborhood real estate values. New center city statutory, parks, and fountains celebrate a civic consensus balancing environmental protection with controlled commercial and residential expansion. Portland has become the model alternative to the unbridled "development" that has shaped most other western centers, especially Seattle.
To explain how this smooth transition has occurred, Abbott has organized his study around three chapters that examine (1) natural landscape and economy (2) social and cultural ecology, and (3) civic participation. By beginning with a discussion of the interaction of climate with terrain, Abbott positions the reader in the atmosphere that shapes the Portland Experience: persistent yet gentle rain, blustery winds, and generally mild temperatures that yield dense foliage, picturesque vistas, and predictable, manageable inconveniences. He explains how Portland, with its natural icon of Mt. Hood and its cultivated Rose Garden west of the downtown, came to be situated just below the confluence of the Columbia and the Willamette rivers. The city and its region have been uniquely inter-dependent, because extracting, processing, and shipping nature’s bounty have dominated its economy until the 1970s. Most of its residents have been skilled workers, business and professional people primarily from the Middle West. Most have been white, with a small admixture of ethnic and racial minorities, and virtually all have worked to create stable neighborhoods. We learn in a later chapter that Portlanders have perceived class conflict as something occurring in the woods, between timber barons and their workers, while the city’s tensions have been between the owners of large businesses and those who owned small ones. In the post-WW II years, as wartime ship builders left, the dependence on processing natural resources remained. Only gradually did electronics firms arrive in western and eastern suburban towns to supplement wood processing.

The second chapter identifies four cultural communities of varying sizes scattered around the metropolitan region. The majority are business people—female and male—and skilled workers, committed to their neighborhoods. These people Abbott appropriately labels "Progressives", a reference to the pre-World War I era when the middle class mobilized politically to oppose corporate monopoly and to defend their property against pollution. In Portland today, this group ranges from very wealthy residents of the West Hills ("Chestnut Hill without the dress code"), to hippies and lesbians in modest east side and northwest neighborhoods. Its leaders arose in law and architectural offices, but also from Model Cities or Head Start projects, women involved in reform political campaigns, or activists campaigning successfully to turn a four-lane highway into a Riverfront Park. The coalition acquired unity by opposing massive renewal projects, especially the Mt. Hood Freeway, which threatened to destroy dozens of east side neighborhoods. It has especially promoted women like former governor Barbara Roberts, whose political agenda balanced conservation with expenditures for social services.

Progressives were noted for finessing the issue of race, and Abbott identifies the predominantly black residents of the Albina district as a separate group. As a small minority, however, they have had to "adjust" to the dominant agenda, including the location of the city’s major interstate and major sports complex through their neighborhoods. Hispanics are located in various suburban landscapes but not given the status of a community, while Asians, a growing and varied presence, figure largely as local color, not as an economic force. Perhaps the limitations of space or lack of numbers have prevented Abbott from exploring the internal dynamics of the black, Hispanic, and Asian communities with the precision he gives to the Progressives. As he ruefully notes, "It is an unhappy American reality that citywide and regional consensus is easier when it is essentially within a single race than when it tries to span racial differences" (p.99).

Abbott gives even less space to his third group, the "Silicon Suburbs," the outlying towns like Gresham and Beaverton. They are depicted as similar to the suburbs of so many western cities that have welcomed electronics firms—and their new jobs. Old communities of farmers and loggers
and their entanglement with changing times are better presented in his discussion of small towns on the "Metropolitan Borderlands." Most are within a twenty-five-mile radius of downtown Portland, though the region extends much further into several national forests. The varied towns like Parkrose, Estacada, and Scapoose guard their own rustic identities, which are being overtaken by persistent suburban sprawl. Unlike the Albinans or the Silicon beneficiaries, however, denizens of the small towns have less experience with the Progressive agenda and apparently less capacity to create adjustable new niches.

In the third chapter, Abbott reverses the focus of chapter one by explaining how Portland's public policies have emerged from the Progressive base to create institutions "to shape cities that can prosper without destroying landscapes" (p. 136). The key political figure for creating the coalition that synthesized steady growth with neighborhood preservation was Neil Goldschmidt, who was elected to the city council in 1970 (age 30) and as mayor in 1972. Goldschmidt developed a vision that turned federal funds for urban renewal from massive infrastructure programs to the rehabilitation of neighborhoods and the strengthening of their ties to a rejuvenated central business district. In response to grass-roots activism to create small parks and preserve neighborhoods, the city in 1974 created the Office of Neighborhood Associations to empower local groups. These, in conjunction with downtown business interests, blocked the proposed Mt. Hood Freeway. Goldschmidt then used federal funds to build light-rail to Gresham, the largest town in western Multnomah County. By 1995, light-rail carried 35 per cent of the people commuting to downtown, a proportion double that of cities like Salt Lake or Denver. The projects saved surrounding poorer neighborhoods while preserving downtown real estate values. Even as a few regional malls sprang up, the central city has remained a vital hub of banking, insurance, education, museums, and medical and business services.

In the 1960s, Portland moved toward innovation in regional governance by creating a Metropolitan Planning Commission to include several contiguous counties. In 1978 this grew into a Metropolitan Government Board with an elected executive and seven elected councilors. It plans for disposable solid waste, runs the zoo and many parks, and most importantly administers the region's land use plan that must conform to statewide goals. In 1979 it adopted an Urban Growth Boundary, with a provision requiring that 50% of new housing within it be attached, single-family structures or apartments. The housing requirements, the geographic limits on sprawl, and the expanding network of high-speed rail lines has greatly increased the region's density, with nodes around the rapid transit stops. The combination of neighborhood involvement in city planning and general consensus on an urban growth boundary has created a uniquely democratic, environmentally conscious, politically sympathetic relationship between the city and its region. Portland, Abbott concludes, is important not for new visions—which hark back to the city beautiful—but for creating a political culture that can enact comprehensive policies to channel growth and to construct a coalition around planning goals.

Reading such a clearly written and persuasive account of a city actively balancing individual property values and the preservation of its collective natural adornments does, however, raise several major questions. First, how much should a desire to analyze a current consensus determine the events selected from the past that seem to explain how we got "here?" Because most current Portlanders seem to be middle class descendants of Middle Westerners, other people whose presence created dramatic problems years ago are mentioned only briefly. Somehow they passed away, occasionally destroyed by urban renewal, sometimes removed to internment camps, more
often dispersed into inarticulate pockets. The lack of drama, the tendency to slight people whose presence has enervated other cities, is somehow disturbing.

Second, how much can we learn about American urban development from a city whose local success is predicated on avoiding the tensions of most large cities? Portland never had an industrial economy, so its landscape was never gouged or severely polluted, and its politics has never been embittered by class conflicts. Nor has it competed with its suburbs for new factories and jobs. Indeed, its middle class has never been challenged to dismantle the Progressive Era commission form of government with at-large elections that assure their control. Abbott occasionally mentions how Portlanders compare their city—favorably—with Seattle. But, curiously, he does not develop obvious comparisons with new rapid transit or downtown reconstruction elsewhere to set Portland’s choices that might unearth local deficiencies to balance against obvious satisfactions. In addition, despite the growing presence of offshore investment around the region, including the arrival of shiploads of Japanese cars, the economic significance of global inclusion or of a working waterfront is not part of neighborhood Progressivism and not discussed.

This contrast between the little its residents have chosen and the great deal it has never had to face raises a third question. Can the obvious beauty of the landscape beguile the interpretive frame? Can Nature impose an historiographic imperative? Does an ecological approach seem so “right” because of the unique slowness in the process of expansion? Abbott’s literary style, studded with quotations from local poets and novelists, evokes an aura of nostalgia that shapes the current civic harmony. The images, however, are hard to reconcile with the bankruptcy of the Portland school district, the persistently poor quality of higher education compared to all other west coast cities, the mediocre museums, the easy choice to obliterate black neighborhoods, not to mention the traffic along the Sunset highway and I-5 at rush hours. The anti-tax crusades born in the 1980s in the Silicon suburbs that have choked off public revenues are barely mentioned, though they identify a serious social cleavage. These conditions and events also have historical roots that display a less than generous side to the Progressive middle class, the business elite, and their environmentalist consensus. While Abbott displays Portland as an attractive, cohesive, and altogether enviable locale, his attachment to his subject evokes also the images and language of a higher bard. With Yeats, gleaning his recollections among school children, we should ask of this essay,

“O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer, Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the dance?”
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