



Historic Streetcar Housing in Portland, Oregon: Background

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The original research for this study was generously supported by a Belluschi Faculty Fellowship and a Fletcher Farr Ayotte Faculty Fellowship.

Courtyard housing was built widely in Portland in the first half of the 20th century, and a clear understanding of these successful, historic examples can inform the design of new courtyard housing to meet today's needs. Portland's existing courtyard buildings are quite small in scale, fitting in well with the predominantly single-family house neighborhoods in which they are located. This complementary scale is an important reason why they have remained vital parts of their neighborhoods through changing circumstances over many years.

Historic context for courtyard housing development

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Portland, Oregon (along with most other growing American cities) developed around an expanding network of streetcar lines. This transportation infrastructure shaped the development pattern of the city, a pattern which only began to change with more widespread use of automobiles in the 1920s, but which was completely transformed in the 1950s, with the removal of the last of the streetcar lines, and the almost total dependence upon private automobiles.

Another important contextual factor was the small size of the typical Portland block. At 200 feet square, the downtown Portland block is the smallest in urban America, providing a high percentage of public street space, and a rich pedestrian experience with many options. The blocks in the older, closer-in residential neighborhoods are also often 200 feet square, but as they move out from the center, most blocks maintain a 200 foot dimension in one direction, while growing to 300 or 400 feet or more in the other. This differentiation is not linked to orientation – the long blocks can run either north-south or east-west, but it does establish a hierarchy of blockfronts within any neighborhood on one grid pattern. The narrow blocks also limit typical lot depth to 100 feet, and make a consistent alley system impossible; very few Portland neighborhoods have alleys, and vehicular circulation to the rear of the lot must be within the lot boundaries.

Portland is a city of small blocks, small lots, and small houses. The typical residential lot is 50 feet by 100 feet, and if houses get much above the size of the usual California / craftsman bungalow, there is not much area left for yards. On a typical lot the house is pushed quite close to the street (with the front yard often raised a foot or two above the sidewalk), and the sideyards are narrow, usually with just enough room for a driveway on one side.

It is within this pattern that Portland's small multi-family housing is scattered. There is a gradient of density away from the routes of the streetcar lines – with higher concentrations of multi-family buildings close and fewer as you move further away - but the historic Portland neighborhoods largely avoid the segregation of multi-family housing from single-family houses that becomes the norm in the era of zoning.

There are huge advantages to this mix of housing types in Portland neighborhoods, advantages which have become all the more clear as the rest of the country has gone in the opposite direction. The multi-family housing can raise the overall density of a neighborhood over the threshold at which local retail becomes viable. This density has the same effect upon the viability and usage of public transit; while Portland doesn't have its original streetcar system, which provided mass transit with walking distance of almost every house in the low-lying neighborhoods (and in some of the hilly neighborhoods), it does have a well-utilized and growing transit system, which is the basis for planned future growth.

Perhaps less tangibly but just as importantly, the widespread dispersal of multi-family housing has allowed for a mixing of social and economic classes that is unusual in American cities today. While Portland certainly has predominantly high-, middle- and lower-income neighborhoods, multi-family housing exists in meaningful numbers in each of these neighborhood classes, allowing people from different groups to rub elbows with and be aware of each other. I would argue that this degree of social mixing may be partly responsible for the high degree of civic engagement and pride in Portland today. Perhaps Portlanders care about their city as a whole because they can come in contact with a more representative range of their fellow citizens.

Relevance for future growth

The Portland metropolitan area is in the midst of strong growth, while reaffirming its commitment to minimal expansion of its urban growth boundary. The primary mechanism through which the Portland region hopes to direct its growth and accommodate these often-contradictory goals is the linking of its transportation system with land use policy. Rather than continue with an ever-expanding highway network, there is a growing system of light rail, streetcars and buses, which are the basis for transit-oriented development. In this transition, a key element is higher density housing development. However, there is a need for new models for higher-density housing, as multi-family housing built in the past 50 years has been predominantly of the suburban, car-dominated variety, inappropriate for a new transit-based and infill development pattern.

This need for appropriate higher density housing models is most important in the city of Portland itself. Whereas the majority of new development in a typical American metropolitan area is at the edge of the region, in greenfield development, in recent years over 60% of the new housing construction in the Portland region (comprising 24 municipalities and 3 counties) has been in the city of Portland itself. Obviously, new infill housing models which enhance rather than destroy existing neighborhoods are critical to Portland's continued ability to grow through densification rather than sprawl. The existing housing types from the streetcar era provide a good starting point for the development of new models, as these existing types have stood the test of time, and have demonstrated how well they can integrate into historic neighborhoods.

Portland's Six historic housing types

Field research conducted ten years ago produced a database of approximately 450 purpose-built multi-family (larger than three dwelling units) buildings in Portland neighborhoods from the streetcar era. These buildings have been catalogued with information on location, lot size, building formal typology, use type, building size and height, number of dwelling units, construction type, and photographs. Over the years, architecture students have carried out more detailed case studies on a number of these buildings. Analysis of this database has established six basic types of multi-family housing in the streetcar districts, which account for approximately 95% of all the buildings documented. These six types are:

Fourplexes - four-unit buildings of flats.

Rowhouses - buildings of more than two attached units, where each unit has its own entry from a public street.

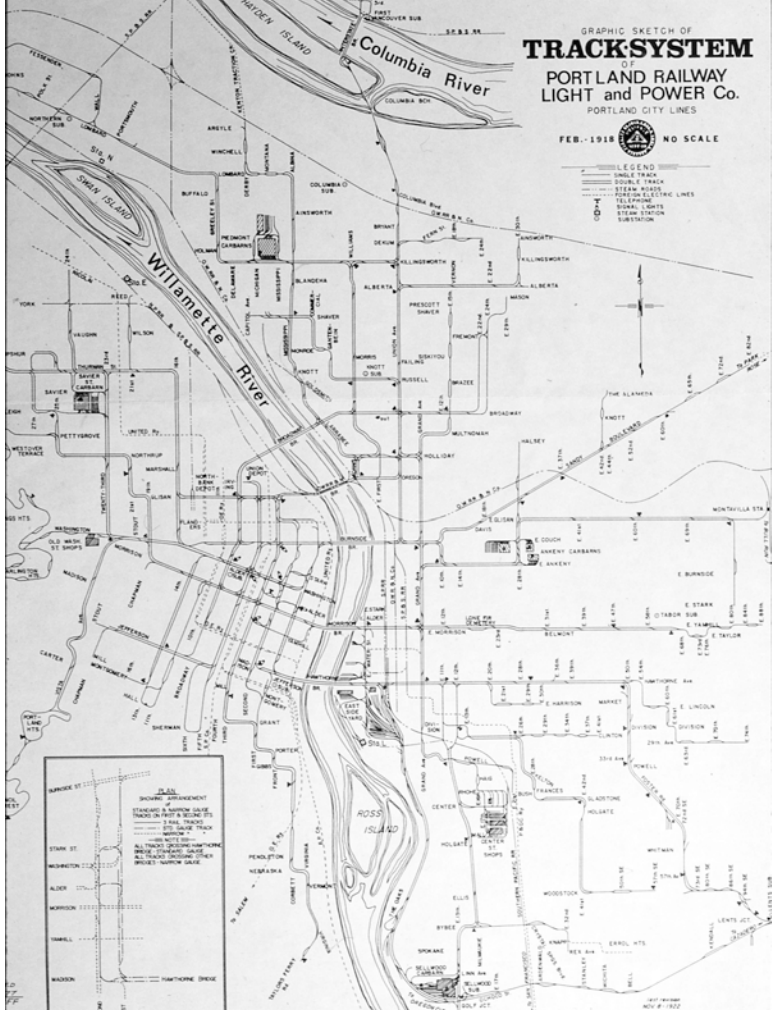
Courtyard housing - which has a common courtyard extending from a public street, and most of the attached units have their own entries off the courtyard.

Block apartment buildings - multi-story apartment buildings with a common front door and central interior circulation.

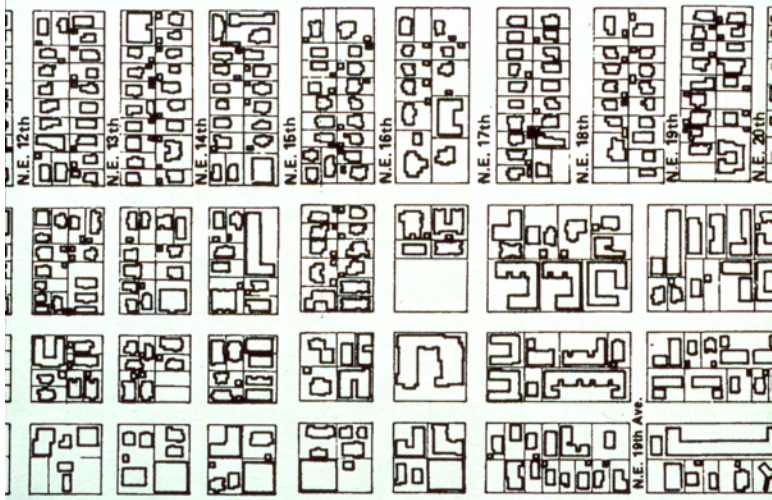
Split-block apartment buildings - where the mass of the large block apartment has been split by a narrow court, to provide increased exterior wall surface and usually for access from the street to the front door.

Mixed-use buildings - usually arranged as blocks, with residential units above commercial space.

[Link to page on Portland's historic courtyard housing](#)



The Portland streetcar system in 1918.



A section of Portland's Irvington neighborhood, showing the higher densities along the streetcar line on Broadway, and the north-south elongated blocks in the residential neighborhood to the north.



A fourplex apartment building in Irvington, one of the city's more expensive neighborhoods.



Extraordinarily terrible infill housing from the post-war automobile age.

