Historic Streetcar Housing in Portland, Oregon: Background

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Curtain wall housing was built in Portland in the first half of the 20th century. Throughout the city, the housing stock was separated into two distinct types: single-family houses and multi-family housing. This division was driven by the historical development of the city and its transportation infrastructure. Single-family houses were built on wide streets and large blocks, while multi-family housing was concentrated in the downtown area and along the streetcar lines.

This phenomenon is an important reason why they have immense value and are subject to preservation efforts.

Habitat context for courtyard housing development

In his book 'Portland: Oregon's City' (1981), John Miller discussed the role of the Portland streetcar system in the evolution of the city's housing stock. He argued that the streetcar lines created a grid pattern of blocks, which allowed for higher densities along the streetcar line. This pattern influenced the development of multi-family housing, particularly in the Irvington and Cathedral Park neighborhoods.

There are huge advantages to this mix of housing types in Portland. Historically, multi-family housing from single-family houses that becomes the norm in the era of zoning. This density has the same efficiency at the block level as the single-family house, but it results in a higher overall density. The advantage is that the small lots reduce the impact on the environment, while the streetcar lines provide a convenient way to get around.

The multi-family housing can raise the overall density of a neighborhood over the threshold at which local retail becomes viable. This is particularly true in Portland, where the multi-family housing is often located near the streetcar system. The streetcar lines have been revitalized in recent years, and they provide a valuable transportation option for residents.

Portland neighborhoods have alleys, and vehicular circulation to the block is usually with just enough room for a driveway on one side. This differentiation is not linked to orientation – the long side of the block is usually with the greatest access from a public street. The typical residential lot is 50 feet by 100 feet, and if houses get closer together, it is usually with just enough room for a driveway on one side.

The Portland streetcar system in 1918. The city's small blocks, small lots, and small houses are the Historical context for courtyard housing development. The Portland metro area is the model of growth, while the streetcar system provides a convenient way to get around.

Historic context for courtyard housing development

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Portland, Oregon (along with the rest of the United States) developed around an automobile age.

Portland's continued ability to grow through densification (comprising 24 municipalities and 3 counties) has been in the city of Portland itself. The existing housing types from the streetcar era dominated variety, inappropriate for a new transit-based and infill development pattern.

Relevance for future growth

Portland has been a city of small blocks, small lots, and small houses. This historical context for courtyard housing development is key to the unique pattern of Portland's small multi-family housing. There is a gradient of density away from the routes of the almost total dependence upon private automobiles.

With the removal of the last of the streetcar lines, and the expanding highway network, there is a growing system of light rail, high-speed rail, and airport service. Portland's small multi-family housing can provide a valuable transportation option for residents.

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