

THRIVING CITIES

CITY PROFILE OF

Portland

TOM KRATTENMAKER



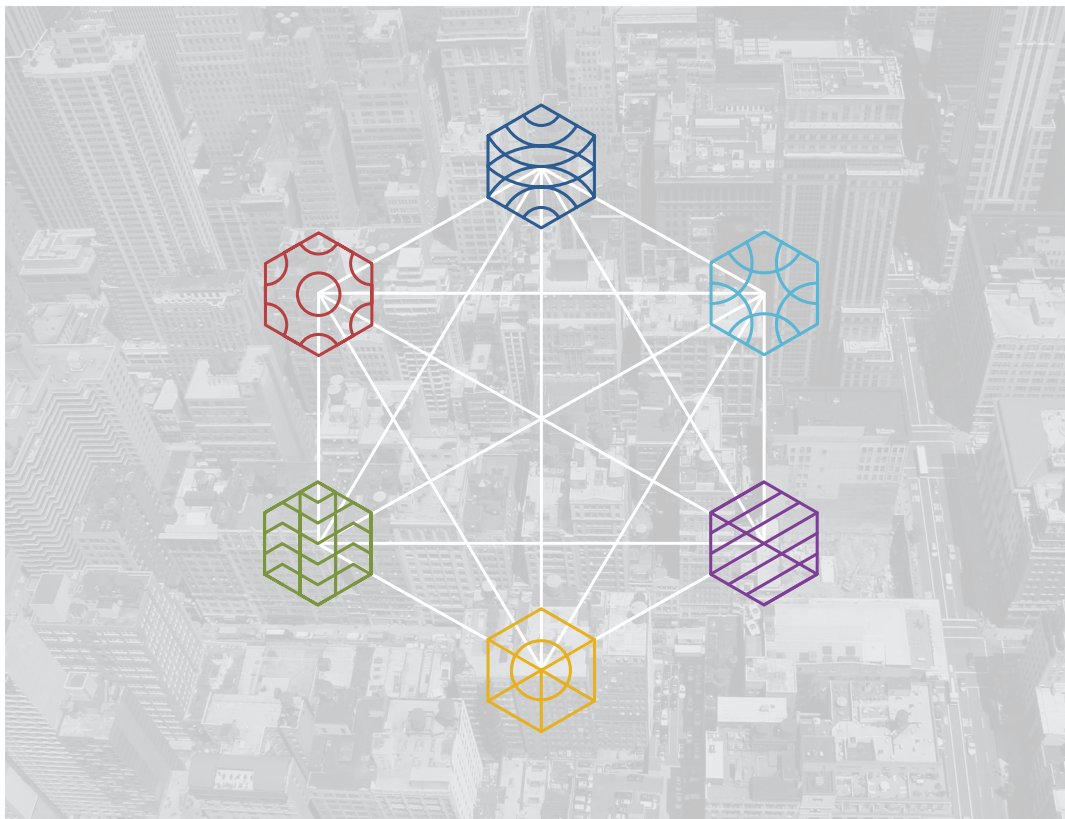
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TOM KRATTENMAKER / 2015

University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced
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City grid art by GridLove Designs



CITY PROFILE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cities are never blank slates. Every urban ranking and rating begs acknowledgement of lasting cultural legacies and histories. It is essential that any quantitative assessment not stand outside of context. At stake is the difference between possessing sheer quantities of information, on the one hand, and quality knowledge, or wisdom, on the other. In order to put data into a context for wise action, Thriving Cities has created distinct city profiles for its pilot cities.

These profiles are central in that they characterize a given pilot city in relation to the Project's distinctive "human ecology" framework and research design. In applying the human ecology framework, profilers collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data on each city according to the six fundamental community endowment areas. Additionally, the profile assesses the unique ways in which the community endowments interact with and relate to each other in the context of a particular city.

City profiles include conventional demographic, economic, and political data, but also incorporate information pertaining to a city's historical peculiarities, cultural norms, and community perceptions, at both the macro-community and the micro-sub-community (e.g., neighborhood) level. They will stand alone as important resources about and in service to their communities.

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I. BACKGROUND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Portland is widely known as a sterling example of a successful, sustainable city. A pioneer in urban planning and green thinking, Portland offers (most of) its residents an experience of urban living that is fresh, healthy, enjoyable, and steeped in pleasant aesthetics and progressive values—and that more and more people are opting for by moving to the area.

However, despite the community's success in providing public transportation, cultivating vibrant neighborhoods, and containing urban sprawl, it has not yet reached a point where it can be said that all Portlanders are living the (green) dream; for people of color, in particular, Portland can be disorienting and disillusioning, to say the least. Until the city addresses its race and equity challenges as well as other relatively neglected “fundamentals”—public education, in particular—the city cannot be said to be truly and thoroughly sustainable or thriving.

In the optimist's view, Portland has what it takes to fill the “holes in its game.” The community's progressive values, in combination with an entrepreneurial savvy and care for the public good, both compel and equip Portland to address these and other challenges in ways that maintain the area's distinctiveness and attractiveness while bringing these attributes within reach of all its residents. To prepare this Portland profile, I collected, read, and analyzed a large volume of data sources, books, and articles. In addition, interviews were conducted, formally and informally, with two dozen or so experts, residents, and activists. In defining the research scope and priorities, as in drafting the profile, I was very much guided by the rigorous methodology of the project designers at the Thriving Cities Project. These elements, combined with my own experience of living and working in Portland for eight years and the instinct and judgment honed over decades of work as a journalist and author, led to the narrative that follows.

Many of the observations are, of course, highly subjective; different writers would have certainly produced profiles with different emphases and conclusions. My hope is that readers will find the material fair and informed, and, most important, that it will serve as a springboard for future research and conversation.

—Tom Krattenmaker, *September 2014*

INTRODUCTION: PORTLAND, OREGON

You have here the basis for civilization on its highest scale.... Are you good enough to have this country in your possession? Have you got enough intelligence, imagination, and cooperation among you to make the best use of these opportunities?¹

—Lewis Mumford, in a challenge to Portland leaders, 1938

Portland, to use a boxing cliché, punches above its weight. Or so it might seem in view of the way this isolated city of modest size and economic clout appears again and again in “best of” rankings of a seemingly endless variety. Best city for microbrews, bicycling, library use, urban forests, green buildings and green energy, young (and, some would add, fiercely underemployed) hipsters—on these lists and many others, Portland comes out on top or close to it.

Many of these are, admittedly, niche distinctions. But Portland makes some rankings appearances that could turn the heads of even the most skeptical observers. In 2012, Oregon had the biggest net migration of any state in the country, according to statistics from the country’s largest household moving company—with the bulk of those migrants settling in and around Portland.² The Rose City (so called because the beloved flowering plant does so well there) topped the “10 Best Cities for 2013” list published on the blog of the real-estate website Movoto.³ More impressive, Portland finds its way onto Monocle magazine’s list of the twenty-five most livable cities—not in the United States, but in the world.⁴ There on Monocle’s ranking, mingling with famous cosmopolitan cities such as Paris, Tokyo, and Madrid, stands Portland, a city that is not even one of the twenty biggest in its own country and, until recent decades, was little more than a backwater.

All these best-of appearances must be taken with a grain of salt, of course. In a time of proliferating lists and rankings, one can find plenty that omit the Rose City. Examine lists of cities with the most corporate headquarters, for example, and you will find no mention of Portland. It can be found on several rankings of a less flattering cast—proof that Portland is no utopia. Disappointing to those with a passion for racial diversity, Portland and environs rank as the least diverse major metro area in the country.⁵ To the consternation of the strait-laced and traditional, the city has also earned the “distinction” of being a top city for strip clubs and the most unchurched city in the United States.⁶

Yet on the whole, Portland has been a rising star in national and international conversations about attractive, livable cities, and a testament to the good that can come from thoughtful urban planning and care for a city and its people (a reputation gilded by a string of flattering portrayals in the New York Times, which seems for a time to have adopted Portland as its favorite city).⁷

Portland: a metropolitan region that appears to have gone a long way on relatively little by way of population and economic might. An overachiever? Perhaps. But the contents of this profile are not the story of a heroic people creating something wonderful out of nothing but their wiles and progressive principles. On the contrary, those who made, grew, and maintained this vibrant city at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers have had a great deal to work with: an abundance of natural resources (lumber, especially), fertile agricultural lands that stretch for mile upon mile outside the city limits, and big-river shipping access to the Pacific Ocean and all that lies on the other side. So, too, have the city’s builders and keepers had an abundance of aesthetic and geographical endowments to propel and inspire them toward something different. Living and working at the eastern foot of steep hills clad with towering evergreens, Portlanders enjoy an urban experience light-years from that of a concrete jungle. Presiding over the proceedings, at least on clear days, stands majestic Mount Hood, its snows and dramatic peak beckoning citizens to a higher ideal of what it means to live and work in an urban setting.



Mount Hood

Source: Photo by Amateria1121. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Accessed at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portland_and_Mt_Hood.jpg.

“I have seen a lot of scenery in my life, but I have seen nothing so tempting as a home for a man than this Oregon country. You have a basis here for civilization on its highest scale, and I am going to ask you a question which you may not like. Are you good enough to have this country in your possession? Have you got enough intelligence, imagination and cooperation among you to make the best use of these opportunities?”⁸ So asked the visiting cultural critic and urbanist Lewis Mumford when he addressed members of the Portland City Club in 1938.

For the most part, Portlanders have been good enough for the city in their possession and the country that surrounds it. They have done so by respecting, maintaining, and leveraging the natural endowments in and around the city. But much remains to be done before the city’s aesthetic, economic, and other riches are enjoyed by all.

DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

At 2.2 million, the population of the Portland metropolitan area ranked twenty-third in the United States in 2010, four places higher than in the 1990 census. The population of the city proper stood at 584,000. A surge of growth in the first decade of the new century—one that continues at perhaps an even greater speed in the present decade—helped propel the city to its higher rank and make Portland one of the country’s few northern metro areas to show a robust population gain. The population of the city proper grew about 1.6 percent from 2013 to 2014⁹; reasons may have included the strength of an improving post-recession economy and worsening drought and heat in the Southwest.

Owing in large part to its northwestern location and a history marked by shameful hostility toward ethnic minorities, the Portland metropolitan area has a population that is extraordinarily white. Caucasians accounted for 87.5 percent of the population in the 2010 census; 3.1 percent of the population was black, 5.4 percent Asian, and 10.5 percent Hispanic or Latino.¹⁰ Like many parts of America, the Portland region has experienced a surge in the size of its Hispanic population. As a percentage, however, the Hispanic population remains smaller than in many cities because of a phenomenon rarely seen among northern metropolitan areas in our postindustrial age: a large in-migration of whites. “New Americans”—immigrants and the children of immigrants—make up a significant percentage of the greater Portland population, as in Oregon as a whole. Foreign-born residents make up roughly 10 percent of the state’s population, double the figure from 1990.¹¹ A study by the Fiscal Policy Institute finds immigrants accounting for 12 percent of economic output in the Portland area.¹²

Following is a summary of other key characteristics of greater Portland.

Religious adherence: Many southern cities proudly declare themselves the “buckle of the Bible belt.” Portland could scarcely be more removed from that conversation, geographically or demographically. Sociologists and journalists have made much of a dramatic rise in the number of Americans who de-

clare no religious affiliation—the “nones.” If the nones have a belt, and that belt has a buckle, it might well be found in Portland. A survey released in 2012 by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies found the Portland area the least religious of all U.S. metropolitan areas of a million people or more, with just 32 percent of residents identifying themselves as religious adherents. By contrast, the figure was 74 percent for Salt Lake City, the area found by the survey to be the country’s most religious.¹³

Land mass: Though a series of annexations, Portland and its metropolitan environs have come to occupy a large land mass. Portland proper covers 145 square miles, and the metro region 6,684 square miles, an area slightly larger than Connecticut.

Climate: The climate lacks extremes of hot and cold and is, above all, rainy. The official term is “temperate oceanic.” Over much of the year, the Portland area lives and works under low clouds and misty rains that can continue for days on end. Mindful of frigid, snowy climates to the east and the scorching temperatures found in the South and Southwest, many residents are glad to take the trade. Ice and snow are rare in Portland, though slightly more common atop the city’s high hills. Summers feature an altogether different weather pattern that belies the area’s wet, overcast reputation. Sunny, dry weather sets in, creating ideal conditions for the hiking, rafting, backpacking, bicycling, and the many other outdoor pursuits that define summer in Oregon.

Employment: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment stood at 6.2 percent in the Portland metro area in early 2014. Considering the influx of working-age people who migrate to the area without jobs already lined up, and the serious unemployment caused by the Great Recession, Portland’s employment statistics are impressively positive. A skeptic might point out that the figures mislead; many working Portlanders are overqualified and underemployed—working less than full-time and often at rates well below what they might fetch if they maximized their earning potential. Yet anecdotal evidence suggests that this is often underemployment by choice. In Portland, high-powered careers do not exert the pull or yield the cachet that they do in many other cities; nor are they necessary for one to enjoy the fruits of living in this part of the world—one can “do” Portland on a relatively small paycheck. It is not at all uncommon to find advanced-degree holders in Portland semi-contentedly working in administrative support positions for which a high school diploma would normally be sufficient.

Income: This laid-back mentality, combined with the relative lack of corporate powerhouses, accounts for the striking income gap between Portland and its large West Coast rivals to the south and north. In 2010, the Portland area’s per capita income was \$38,842, well below those of San Francisco (roughly \$61,000) and Seattle (about \$49,000).

Poverty: Along with a lack of conspicuous personal wealth and its flaunting, the Portland area has relatively modest poverty rates and less concentrated poverty than one finds in some large urban areas to the east. Approximately 43,000 families were under the poverty line in the 2005-07 time period, according to 2010 census data. The figure for individuals was slightly more than 250,000—some 79,000 of them children. Because of an “inside-out” phenomenon in Portland that will be explored later in this report, poverty tends to be pushed to the peripheries of the city and the region. The 2012 City Vitals report found, for example, that among the nation’s fifty-one largest metro areas, greater Portland was seventh lowest for poverty in its urban core. Yet for the region as a whole, Portland’s poverty rates place it in the middle of the pack, at eighteenth lowest.¹⁴

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PORTLAND’S DEVELOPMENT

“The clearing.” This was how pioneering locals of European descent referred to the meadow in the woods along the western bank of the lower Willamette, a dozen miles south of the river’s confluence with the Columbia. It was on this spot that the Portland story began. The clearing had long served as a campsite and rest area for the Indians who had lived in the region for centuries, and for the whites who were beginning to frequent it in the mid-1800s.¹⁵ In 1845, settlers Asa Lovejoy and Francis Pet-



Waterfront Park

Source: iStock, photographer – Dave Allen

tygrove realized that it had the potential to be much more. They hired a surveyor to lay out a town grid, choosing, for reasons unknown but widely appreciated today, relatively small 200-square-foot blocks. Lovejoy, from Boston, and Pettygrove, from Portland, Maine, each wanted to name the town-to-be for his home city. Unable to resolve the matter, they flipped a coin.¹⁶ Such are the origins of the city's name and the unusually "petite" city blocks that have made the city center airy, filled with natural light, and conducive to walking.

The city's history might surprise those who know Portland today as the bastion of vegans and eco-activists. Until very recent decades, Portland was a working-class town with an economy based on agriculture, shipping, logging, and, during World War II, shipbuilding. The city had a seedy side as well, a network of flophouses, brothels, and gambling dens for sailors and others with a taste for disreputable pastimes. In managing civic affairs, Portland tended to be cautious, conservative, and content to remain small and provincial.

So, too, did it strive to remain largely white. In the state's earliest days, African Americans were forbidden by state law from relocating to Oregon. This racist law was eventually overturned, but custom, culture, and geography conspired to keep the black population very small in Portland until the World War II shipbuilding boom sparked an influx of black workers. Many lived in a hastily developed community called Vanport along the banks of the Columbia in North Portland. When the area was devastated by the infamous Vanport flood of 1948 and no attempt was made to rebuild the community, the black residents either left the state or settled in a neighborhood in Northeast Portland tightly bounded by redlining and mortgage discrimination. In more recent times, urban renewal and gentrification have continued the work of the blatant racism of old, albeit in subtler ways.

The genesis of Portland's transformation from its cautious provincialism can be found in the awakening of the environmental movement in the 1960s, sparked locally by a journalistic exposé on Willamette River pollution by a television news reporter who would go on to become a Republican governor, Tom McCall. Coupled with that process, a generational change in city leadership occurred by which a younger and progressive cohort came to power in the 1970s, intent on enacting progressive measures



Streetcar near Portland State University

Source: Photo by Visitor7. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Accessed at [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portland_Streetcar_\(Park_Blocks\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portland_Streetcar_(Park_Blocks).jpg)

that would preserve the area's urban and natural assets.¹⁷ In a time of white flight from urban centers, Portland took a different turn, recommitting to a vibrant downtown that could remain a hub for shopping, finance, culture, and jobs, and protecting forest and farmland from suburban sprawl. Portland's famed urban planning era was born, complete with a landmark urban growth boundary that remains in force four decades later.

Much of what visitors and newcomers marvel at today finds its origins in the pivotal decisions of the 1970s. For example, stretching for miles on the west bank of the Willamette, between the river and downtown, is a waterfront park that bears McCall's name and plays host to daily throngs of strollers, runners, and cyclists, an outdoor crafts market, and the series of festivals that set the rhythm of the summer calendar in Portland. Yet as recently as the 1960s, there was no waterfront park along that prime stretch of river—just a busy expressway. In addition to tearing up a road and creating a park on the waterfront, the new guard put a halt to long-standing plans to build a freeway running east from downtown most of the way to Mount Hood. The money was redirected to establishing the area's first light-rail line, seeding what would become one of the country's best urban transit systems, by which light rail, streetcars, bicycle commuting, and walking keep car commuting to a minimum.

Portland's direction was set.

"In Portland, we have paid great attention to creating a hospitable public realm—parks, squares, and wide sidewalks—because these places generate sociability and health for all," said Mayor Charlie Hales in a message welcoming invitees to the 2014 edition of the International Making Cities Livable Conference—held, tellingly, in Portland. "We have created a network of streetcars, buses, and light rail, so that everyone—not only those with cars—can get around the city in a sociable manner. With the help of the growth boundary, we have focused development in all our neighborhoods instead of at the outer periphery, enabling us to create dense, human scale, walkable 10-minute communities," Mayor Hales wrote.¹⁸

As the mayor suggests, "hospitable" indeed is the experience Portland creates for its residents and visitors—to a point. For all the pride and optimism one finds in the city and its environs, anyone following the local news is aware of growing frustration among those who do not experience the progressive "Portland dream" at its best, particularly African Americans and residents of the city's outer east side, where streetcars do not run and where the city's famed planning genius has yet to bear fruit. Mindful

of such issues, city leaders emphasize equity in the Portland Plan, a blueprint for the future passed by the city council in 2012.

Few would oppose equity on principle. But whether greater Portland can achieve more of it, and whether it can retain its famed livability in the face of large predicted population growth, are very much open questions as the city contemplates how far it has come, and far it has to go.

II. ENDOWMENTS

“THE TRUE”: THE REALM OF KNOWLEDGE

For those in the process of learning about Portland and growing enamored of its progressivism, of its penchant for addressing public needs with earnest acumen, the city and region hold a disappointing surprise: They have not, on the whole, demonstrated the level of commitment to, and success at, public education that one might expect.

Owing in part to the region’s economic heritage, which emphasized brawn instead of brains, Portland’s education infrastructure is striking as much for what it lacks as what it touts. For example, the public schools do not achieve the overall graduation rates one would expect from a system of Portland’s demographic mix; the City Club of Portland has used the word “crisis” to characterize the high dropout rates. Contrary to what the uninitiated might expect of a city with Portland’s international reputation—and, in contrast to Seattle’s example, conspicuously—the city also lacks a comprehensive research university. Fortunately for the metro region’s economy and the thriving technology industry, greater Portland is able to attract large numbers of degree-holding migrants who have studied and done research at institutions of that type elsewhere.

The largest school district in the Northwest and by far the largest in the city, the Portland Public Schools system operates eighty-one schools (including seventeen special services programs and seven charter schools) and educates roughly 47,000 students.¹⁹ The city has five smaller school districts within its borders as well, which bring the total public school enrollment to roughly 77,000.²⁰ Although the region does not have a tradition of private K-12 schools as strong as those of some East Coast cities, Multnomah County (of which Portland is the county seat) is nonetheless home to more than 100 private schools (including private preschools funded in part by the federal Head Start program).²¹ Among them are highly regarded Jesuit High School, Oregon Episcopal Academy, and Catlin Gabel School. Together, private institutions educate roughly 14 percent of the metro area’s students.²²

In public school funding, Oregon lags behind the national average, although the \$10,800 per student funding rate in the Portland schools for 2008-09 slightly surpassed the average for comparably sized U.S. districts.²³ Perhaps surprisingly, suburban Beaverton, home to the international headquarters of Nike, spent significantly less per student than other comparably sized U.S. school districts.

To a greater extent than is the case in most other large urban public school systems, a sizable proportion of students in Portland Public Schools are white, although the percentage diminishes with each passing year. In district counts from 2013, Caucasians made up 55.8 percent of the student population, Asians 7.9 percent, African Americans 10.7 percent, Hispanics 16.2 percent, Native Americans 1.1 percent, Pacific Islanders 0.9 percent, and those of multiple ethnicities 7.4 percent.²⁴ To turn again to the large suburban school district in Beaverton (the third-biggest school district in Oregon), one finds diversity metrics that demolish the notion of “lily-white” suburbs. Nearly half the students in Beaverton schools are members of minority groups, and the district reports an astonishing ninety-four primary languages spoken in its students’ homes.²⁵ A similar pattern prevails in the smaller districts on the outer east side of Portland; nearly 100 different languages are spoken by students in the David Douglas, Reynolds, Parkrose, and Centennial school districts.²⁶

Some 45 percent of students in Portland Public Schools are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, according to October 2013 statistics,²⁷ a finding that highlights a large and worrisome gap between the economic well-being of public school students and the city population as a whole.

Test scores in the city's public schools continue to cause concern and provide ample grist for local handwringing and newspaper coverage. In 2012, for example, statewide test score results painted a mixed but overall disappointing portrait: While elementary schools performed well at meeting newly revised (i.e., tougher) state reading standards, no progress was measured in middle schools and high schools. Portland's daily newspaper, *The Oregonian*, in alarmed tones typical of its education coverage, reported that only two-thirds of the state's high school juniors demonstrated adequate math, writing, and science skills, and that "students' performance in math and science was weak across all grades."²⁸ In Portland Public Schools, already-low math and science scores remained flat.

Absenteeism plagues many schools in Oregon, including Portland's—a problem the state's top education official has termed "atrocious" and that *The Oregonian* describes as perhaps worse than in any other state in the country. In the 2012-13 school year, nearly a quarter of the state's high school students missed at least 10 percent of school days. The rate was nearly as high for middle school students (20 percent for eighth graders).²⁹ Given the correlation between chronic absenteeism and educational failure, the data are ominous, to say the least.

Graduation rates in Portland Public Schools have shown improvement in recent years but remain a subject of great public concern. A five-year overall improvement from 53 percent to 63 percent was reported in December 2012,³⁰ and the district's graduates go on to college at rates approaching 70 percent.³¹ While these metrics compare favorably with those of many large urban school districts, they are hardly cause for celebration. They mean that more than a third of the district's students are entering adult life without a diploma, a grave handicap in today's knowledge-based economy. And the graduation rates are significantly lower for black, Hispanic, and Native American students (53 percent, 54 percent, and 29 percent, respectively, in 2011-12.)³² The five smaller districts in the city fare little better, with only one (the tiny Riverdale district in Southwest Portland) graduating more than two-thirds of its students.³³

One number that is rising rapidly in the city's public schools is the population of non-white students, representing a level of diversity that "white Portland" has not previously experienced. Given that educational success and failure correlate with ethnic backgrounds for a whole complex of reasons, and given the different kinds of teaching and support structures required to serve black, Latino, and Native American students, one must ask, how will Portland rise to this challenge?

As for higher education, the incomplete constellation of institutions points to the reality that Oregon has traditionally "used muscles more than minds," as urban studies and planning professor Carl Abbott writes.³⁴ The state's flagship research university, the University of Oregon, is located downstate in Eugene, and Oregon State University is tucked away in Corvallis some ninety minutes from Portland. This leaves the state's biggest city without the research clout of its northern rival, Seattle, which is home to the University of Washington and, not coincidentally, a high-powered aerospace industry.

The Rose City's dominant public university is Portland State, which has grown impressively in size and quality in recent decades and has distinguished itself in urban planning and design, among other areas. Yet for all its progress, Portland State lacks the prestige and comprehensive research and academic clout of the University of Washington and its Bay Area counterparts, Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley.

Fortunately for Portland, the city is home to Oregon Health & Science University, a medical school and research center that brings talent and grant money to the city and promises to become an even bigger player in the future, both regionally and nationally. In 2013, Nike billionaire Phil Knight pledged a \$500 million match for the establishment of a world-class cancer research center at OHSU if the university could raise a similar amount.

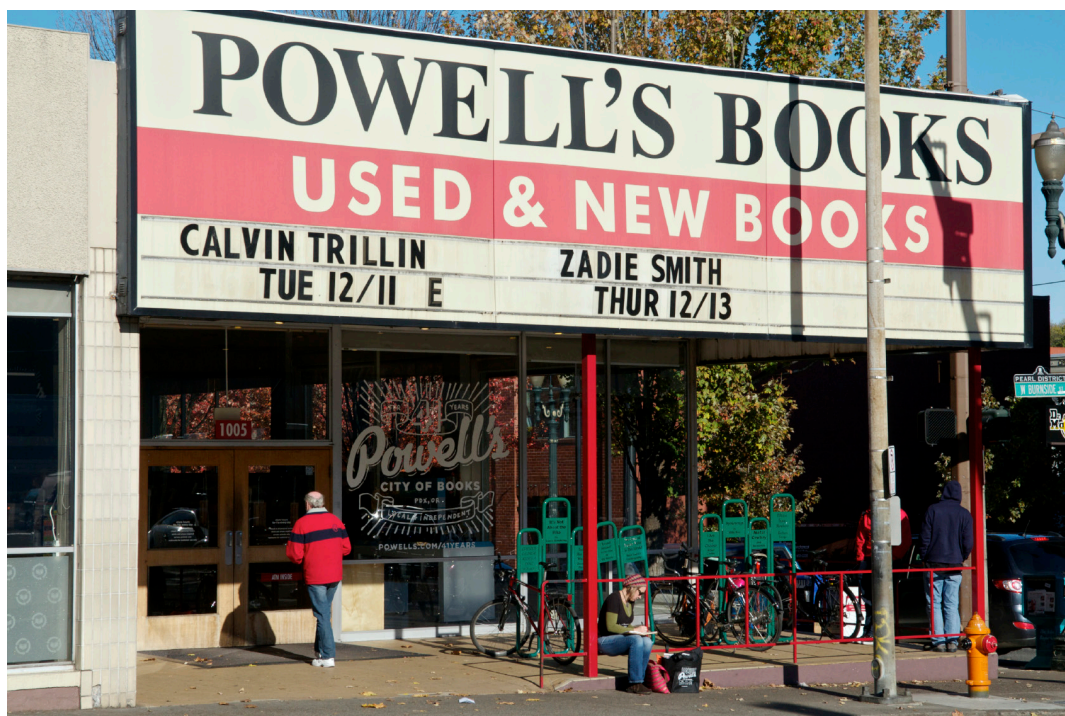
Bringing academic prestige and a reverse “brain drain” dynamic to the city are two liberal arts colleges with national reputations and mostly out-of-state student populations, Reed College and Lewis & Clark College. A multi-campus community college system also serves the greater metro area, as do Pacific Northwest College of Art and a handful of private institutions with religious ties, including Linfield College, Pacific University, George Fox University, Warner Pacific College, Multnomah University, Concordia University, Marylhurst University, and the University of Portland.

Census data show that 33 percent of the metro-area population has a bachelor’s degree, a figure exceeding the state and national figure of 28 percent. The proportion of people with bachelor’s degrees is particularly high in Multnomah County and in Washington County, the area to the west of Portland proper that is home to the metro area’s technology industry.

Analyzing the broader educational dynamics of Portland—generally unimpressive performance metrics juxtaposed with a relatively high proportion of Portland metro-area residents possessing college degrees—one arrives at a picture that can only be described as ironic for an area that revels in its grow-your-own localism: When it comes to brains, Portland appears to have settled on an import strategy.

The abundance of diploma-bearing migrants probably helps account for the Portland area’s good performance on other measures one would associate with learning and intelligence. On a per capita basis, the Portland metro area ranked sixth nationally in patents issued from 2006 to 2010.³⁵ Media outlets have also hailed Portland as a top city for entrepreneurs, the personal finance website NerdWallet having named it fifth best in the country for women entrepreneurs, specifically.³⁶

In other areas as well, Portland demonstrates a scrappy but vibrant life of the mind. Book culture flourishes in the city in the form of independent bookstores, including the massive and locally revered Powell’s City of Books; a literary arts center that brings in world-famous authors to speak to sellout crowds in the city’s premier downtown auditorium; numerous book clubs and city reading programs; and library and newspaper circulation rates among the highest in the United States. All this suggests that in Portland, a place associated with physical fitness, people exercise their minds as well as their bodies—albeit in ways that are often informal and do-it-yourself more than ivory tower.



Powell's Books

Source: iStock, photographer - GarysFRP

Yet when it comes to educating the next generation and securing the region's future, do-it-yourself learning and in-migration will get you only so far. The public education dynamic in the metro area—in Portland proper, especially—offers something of a case study in how one set of progressive values played out to the “nth degree” can lead to another set of outcomes that are anything but progressive. With respect to public education, those outcomes can be summed up in two words: “benign neglect.” (Some would challenge the “benign” part.)

For couples living the Portland dream, whether they are gay or straight, married or cohabitating, child rearing is often absent from their plans and priorities. In the fashionable Pearl District, with its loft condominiums and stylish galleries and shops, one is far more likely to see people out on the sidewalks with dogs than with children. About the only time one sees children in the Pearl is on hot summer days, when the cascading fountains are turned on in Jamison Square and parents bring their kids to splash and play—often from outside the neighborhood.

These observations are borne out by the city's development patterns. The precincts in the city that tend to be extolled by the New York Times and spoofed on the television series *Portlandia* are not known for high fertility rates, to say the least. As a result, the areas of the city undergoing development and gentrification have shrinking school enrollments, a development that is pushing some iconic school buildings—valued neighborhood resources, as the writers of the Portland Plan describe them—closer and closer to white elephant status.

Meanwhile, the areas experiencing the most robust enrollment growth, mostly on the city's eastern edge, tend to lack the buildings and resources needed to give their growing student populations a good education. Teachers struggle with large class sizes district-wide, a problem that went from bad to worse during the Great Recession.³⁷

Here again, an otherwise positive aspect of Portland—its well-known urban planning and development commitments and methods—handicaps the education system. As the Portland Plan makes evident, tax abatement programs and other tools of urban renewal severely limit the ability to generate tax revenue to pay for new schools, and for the teachers, training, curriculum development, and support systems needed to educate a student population decidedly different from the largely white demographic the schools are accustomed to teaching. These urban development policies may be smart ways to encourage people to build or rehabilitate homes, or start new businesses in struggling areas, but for a strapped educational system they translate to one unfortunate outcome for public education: foregone revenue.

Also constraining revenue are constitutional amendments passed by Oregon voters in 1990 and 1997 that sharply limit the growth of property tax assessments—a development with obvious implications for a state school system that once counted on property taxes for the lion's share of its funding. As the advocacy group Our Portland Our Schools points out, Oregon public schools today are heavily reliant on money from the state's general fund budget, which is fed by income taxes and is thus subject to the ups and downs of the state's economy (not to mention the schools' need to compete with other urgent public needs, such as human services and public safety).

To educate the children who are coming into the city's public schools, the community will have to be at its best. Volumes of research have documented the correlation between poverty and educational failure. Poverty, unfortunately, is becoming far more prevalent in the student population than it has been in the past. Historically, Portland has enjoyed child poverty rates lower than the national average. Those rates, however, are rising more rapidly than the average; they increased by nearly five percentage points, from 16.6 percent to 21.0 percent, between the 1999-2000 and 2008-09 academic years. Child poverty rates are particularly high in two of the smaller districts on the city's far east side, 32 percent and 31 percent in Reynolds and David Douglas, respectively.³⁸

It cannot be fairly said that city and state leaders are failing to recognize the importance of public education and the need for improvement. The state has, in fact, established a very ambitious educa-

tional goal: the much-publicized “40-40-20” public education reform initiative. By an act of the Oregon legislature in 2011, the state has committed itself to achieving, by 2025, an educated population in which 40 percent have at least a bachelor’s degree, 40 percent have an associate’s degree or a meaningful postsecondary certificate, and all the rest have at least a high school diploma. One could be forgiven for feeling pessimistic about the likelihood of attaining this admirable and ambitious goal—especially in view of current trend lines that show, at best, a mix of failure and success. In the several years since passage of the 40-40-20 initiative, several warning signs have emerged that the goal might not be achievable. For example, in 2013 the Oregon Department of Education released data showing a slight increase in the statewide dropout rate, hardly a propitious start toward the goal of 100 percent of Oregonians earning a high school diploma.³⁹ In the summer of 2014, meanwhile, the presidents of the state’s seven public universities and seventeen community colleges issued a letter to the state’s Higher Education Coordinating Commission in a push for more funding for their institutions, warning that budget increase caps set by Governor John Kitzhaber would “not allow us to account for ongoing tuition relief, adequately prepare tomorrow’s work force and secure the necessary funds to meet Oregon’s 40/40/20 goal.”⁴⁰ All this has occurred in the context of an increasingly challenging demographic picture and a citizens’ complacency borne of the city’s famed casualness and its ability to attract degree holders from elsewhere. As *The Oregonian*’s watchdog education reporter Betsy Hammond asked in one of numerous articles on disturbingly low graduation rates, “Has our city’s famous laid-back tolerance of different life paths lulled us into acceptance as nearly half of our high school students go over an educational cliff?”⁴¹

If Hammond’s hard rhetorical question sounds hyperbolic today, it is worth remembering that she asked it in 2010, when Portland Public Schools’ four-year graduation rate was actually in the 50s. Today, by contrast, the public school system is seeing encouraging graduation rate progress. One positive sign, in addition to the work of the schools’ faculties and administrations, is that the community has shown signs of rallying around the cause of improved public education, through efforts including the church-school partnerships undertaken as part of the impressive CityServe initiative (which is discussed at length in the next section of this profile), the Right Brain Initiative, a program launched in 2008 to give all student access to arts education, and a nonprofit organization working in support of public education, All Hands Raised.

Clearly, few if any in Portland are for educational failure; few if any are against a good education for all students. So, too, is it important to bear in mind that a community disappointed in the outcomes of its public school system cannot fairly place the blame solely on the schools’ administration, faculty, and staff; the causes of public schools’ underperformance transcend school district domains, extending into complex sociological phenomena related to family dynamics, demography, globalized and localized economic factors, and more. The question is not whether and how the schools will improve themselves; it is, rather, whether the Portland-area public, in the context of state-level funding and governance issues, will care enough about schools to do the hard, smart work that is necessary for the city to succeed at education the way it has at planning, sustainability, the arts, and the other civic endowment areas that have distinguished Portland and its environs.

“THE GOOD”: THE REALM OF SOCIAL MORES AND ETHICS

“Cities are built upon the things from which humanity attempts to derive its ultimate significance. Whether centered around a mosque or a financial district, a cathedral, or an entertainment sector, all cities are built in honor of and pay homage to some type of a ‘god.’” So write Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard in their 2013 book *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church*.⁴² In addition to calling to mind several intriguing storylines about religion and morals in the Portland area, the authors’ proposition frames a fascinating question: Who or what is Portland’s god?

Judging from the demographic data and increasingly common knowledge, it is not primarily the God of Abraham that orients the Portland area. As noted earlier, Portland is by some measures the least conventionally religious major city in the United States. Although no recent development—the Pacific

Northwest has long been less religiously affiliated and less churched than other parts of the country—the secularizing trend has certainly become more pronounced and conspicuous in recent decades.

Yet concern for the good and the ethical, defined in fluid, complex ways, does shine through in Portland. The city is full of earnest, activism-minded people with a commitment to community service and social justice. It features a fascinating artisan economy that has at its core an ethical/moral commitment to expanding “social wealth” and training one’s sights on more than personal acquisition. Intriguingly, the metro area even distinguishes itself for the character and activities of its conventional religious institutions. Portland is home to a strong and active Christian ecumenical organization—Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon—and a Muslim educational and philanthropic organization—the Muslim Educational Trust—that have earned respect and visibility while contributing to inter-religious understanding. The area’s evangelical churches, despite operating in such a “post-Christian” environment (or perhaps because of it), have distinguished themselves by their commitment, innovation, and positive impact.

In Multnomah County, encompassing Portland proper and several suburban cities to the east, Catholics are the largest religious group, making up 15 percent of the population. Evangelical Protestants are next (10 percent), followed by mainline Protestants (4 percent), Mormons (2 percent), and black Protestants (0.4 percent). The largest category, by far, “unclaimed,” makes up 64 percent of the county population.⁴³

**MULTNOMAH COUNTY, OREGON
RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS, 2010**

73,465	3,590	31,544	3,915	112,380	471,400
Evangelical Protestant	Black Protestant	Mainline Protestant	Orthodox	Catholic	Unclaimed

Source: Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies

Reflecting the individualism and do-it-yourself spirit of the region (not to mention the relatively shallow pockets of its corporate and philanthropic networks), Portland-area residents appear relatively ungenerous in the aggregate when it comes to charitable donations. But this is not to say that they are calloused toward those in need. On a per capita basis, Oregon surpasses the national median in its number of nonprofit organizations and in the percentage of residents who volunteer. Portland, with a volunteer rate of 36 percent in one study, ranked second only to Minneapolis.⁴⁴ Recently, some Portland enthusiasts have been claiming that the city has more nonprofits per capita than any city in the country.⁴⁵ Whether the claim is accurate or not, the proliferation of nonprofits in Portland—running the gamut from child support organizations to bicycling advocacy groups and, yes, a nonprofit beer hall run by a pastor—is unmistakable and impressive.

Among Portland’s patchwork quilt of nonprofits, one of the best known and most established is Mercy Corps, which bases its worldwide humanitarian efforts in downtown Portland. Other notable philanthropic organizations in the area are the James F. & Marion L. Miller Foundation, the Meyer Memorial Trust, the Oregon Community Foundation, and the Ann and Bill Swindells Charitable Trust, all headquartered in Portland, and the Murdock Trust, headquartered across the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington.⁴⁶ One of the nation’s largest Christian evangelistic organizations, the Luis Palau Association, is headquartered in Beaverton. Also of note is All Hands Raised, a nonprofit dedicated to private fundraising for Portland Public Schools and other programs to support the development of children into educated, independent adults. Relatively new on the scene is the Portland Leadership Foundation, part of a national network of faith-based leadership foundations. The foundation has distinguished itself by organizing, among other projects, “Embrace Oregon,” which is addressing a crisis in the foster care system by pairing volunteers with the Oregon Department of Human Services to support vulnerable children and foster parents and the department staff who serve them.

The action by Portland Leadership Foundation founders Ben Sand and Anthony Jordan (both evangelical Christians) to address the foster care crisis speaks to their Christian commitment—and to the severity of the situation in the metro area. Figures for 2011 show that Multnomah County had 2,037 children in foster care, or 13.5 per 1,000 children residing in the county. (Washington County and Clackamas County had significantly smaller rates, 5.6 and 4.4, respectively.)⁴⁷ African American and Native American children are disproportionately represented in the Multnomah County foster care population—dramatically so in the case of Native American children.⁴⁸

As the foster care crisis suggests, Portland's is not a culture strongly associated with “family values.” Consistent with that, Oregon's marriage rate as of 2009—there were 6.6 marriages per 1,000 residents that year—was slightly below the national average of 6.8; the state's divorce rate of 3.9 per 1,000 exceeded the national figure of 3.4.⁴⁹

In a related vein, churches and their participants do not have the status they enjoy in the Bible belt. Christians in Portland attest to the fact that revealing one's religious stripes in the “People's Republic” can expose one to suspicion and stereotyping—just the opposite of what Christians experience in more thoroughly church-ed areas of the country.

If America is gradually becoming a “post-Christian” country, which seems true in view of the overarching demographic trends, Portland is an area that is experiencing the future sooner than most. This poses challenges for the community—more on that below—but the dynamic has also spawned an intriguing and positive trend among the church subgroup that would, on the surface, seem most severely disadvantaged by the cultural shift: the evangelicals. Behind the leadership of the Luis Palau Association and with the support of city government officials and corporate sponsors, the metro area's evangelical churches have joined forces to perform large-scale, sustained service projects. These include free medical and dental clinics, care and support for homeless people, and partnerships with public schools revolving around large numbers of church volunteers providing services such as rehabilitating the schools and grounds, mentoring students, and providing clothes and toiletries to those in need. The church-school partnerships, which passed the 250-school milestone in 2014, have sparked concerns about unconstitutional promotion of religion at the schools. But the church volunteers have committed to, and have maintained, a no-proselytizing approach to their work with the school's students, faculty, and staff. Called the “Season of Service” (since renamed CityServe Portland), the churches' service campaign in its first year mobilized 550 churches and 27,000 volunteers, who together undertook roughly 300 community service projects.⁵⁰ Reader's Digest named it the top group service project in the country for 2008.

Attracting positive local and national media coverage, as well as attention from evangelical leaders around the country weary of culture-war politics and looking for new ways to engage a skeptical public, the churches' service work demonstrated how religion can be vibrant and relevant even in such a strongly “post-Christian” environment as Portland. The same can be said of the non-evangelical faith communities, which through ecumenical activities and earnest interfaith work have fostered inter-religious understanding, raised a credible lobbying voice in state government, and defused Christian-Muslim tensions since the 9/11 attacks. Predominantly black churches have played an important role as well despite a gentrification trend that has displaced many of their congregants. The Albina Ministerial Alliance, for example, has been a locus of activism in the effort to hold the police accountable for shootings and other forms of excessive force.

So, too, can many quintessentially secular Portlanders—the types celebrated and lampooned on Portlandia for their localism and ethical consumption patterns—be credited with cultivating a form of the moral and the good. Charles Heying, in his book *Brew to Bikes: Portland's Artisan Economy*, uses terms such as “social wealth” and “moral economy” to describe the networks of Portland producers and buyers who eschew an ethic of mass production and low-price consumption. Instead, Heying persuasively writes, participants in this moral economy distinguish between “traditional conceptions of wealth” and a “more grounded and communal sense of wealth.” Artisans, Heying adds, express the sense that “social wealth makes it possible for them to experience a high quality of life because

they rely less on individual consumption and personal accumulation and more on participating in shared benefits of a lively community.”⁵¹ The dynamic connects strongly to sustainability, which is enthusiastically practiced by many archetypal Portlanders and which has, at its core, a set of worthy ethical commitments.

But while Portlanders distinguish themselves in these ways and more, both inside and outside conventional religious and philanthropic organizations, and while the community has done exceptionally well at modeling some forms of ethical urban life for other U.S. cities, one finds contradictions and festering problems that Portlanders have not fully addressed. Portland has a conspicuous homelessness problem, to cite one example. The many strip clubs might seem harmless to progressive Portlanders, most of whom would not be caught dead acting prudish about sex, but some also covers for the prostitution of sex-trafficked girls and women.⁵² As the Portland Leadership Foundation has learned, finding adoptive homes for the area’s large number of foster children is frustratingly difficult. These problems all point to the plain reality of an incomplete commitment to the common good. Asked what could ultimately be Portland’s downfall, Portland Leadership Foundation CEO Ben Sand gave a terse one-word reply: “selfishness.”⁵³ Former mayor Sam Adams, a liberal who enthusiastically embraced the CityServe partnership with the evangelical community, cites what might be termed a flakiness on the part of the many secular progressives for whom Portland is widely known, in that their hearts are usually in the right place, but they do not always follow through.⁵⁴

Such is the promise and puzzle of Portland, a community that has devised and demonstrated exciting new ways to advance the public good in a post-religious context, but that seems at times to have skipped some of the “fundamentals”—for example, care for neglected children or justice for ethnic minorities—that are central to more traditional and enduring conceptions of the common good.

Whether post-religious Portland can muster the commitment and energy to take on this difficult unfinished business raises a larger question about America. As noted by Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core, churches and religious organizations have traditionally been vital contributors to their communities through the institutions they have built: hospitals, schools, charities, and the like. “What will happen to U.S. civil society as the pews empty out?” Patel asks. “Who will support all those schools, hospitals, and social service agencies? Who will build new ones?”⁵⁵

Increasingly, in Portland as in other cities, the onus will be on the non-religious to show that they, too, have the heart, resources, savvy, and collective muscle to meet social needs, address injustices, and cultivate the common good.

“THE BEAUTIFUL”: THE REALM OF AESTHETICS

“Blurred lines.” This would be an apt descriptor of the porous boundaries in Portland between art as it is conventionally understood (theater, painting and sculpture, music, etc.) and the “art form” Portlanders have made out of ardent devotions such as organic farmers’ markets, urban design, tattoos, sustainability, cuisine, and handcrafted beer and other consumer products—even the chants, songs, and signs of the soccer crazies who support the Portland Timbers and Portland Thorns professional soccer teams with unmatched zeal and creativity. Indeed, Portlanders live amid a swirl of aesthetics that are not confined to art, per se. Even nature gets in on the act, with towering conifers and majestic Mount Hood creating vistas that at times seem more like fanciful paintings than the everyday view from the city.

Yet the Portland region also enjoys a robust constellation of high-quality “regular” art, which city residents partake in and support—including at the ballot box. One indication of the population’s commitment to art is that Portlanders voted for a ballot measure in 2012, the Arts Education and Access Income Tax, that instituted a new levy to fund arts education and arts nonprofit organizations. The Regional Arts and Culture Council, supported by funds from the city, three metropolitan-area counties,

and a variety of other regional and national sources, supports arts on several fronts. Among them are direct grants to artists and organizations, a robust public art program, arts events, and the effort to integrate art into public school curricula, the Right Brain Initiative. These forms of support, in combination with a mix of people and a cultural aesthetic that make the city attractive to “creatives,” help account for the city’s strong reputation for artistic quality. Urban theorist Richard Florida has placed Portland on his list of “most creative cities” in the United States,⁵⁶ and ArtPlace has named the city’s Pearl District one of the top “art places” in the country.⁵⁷

The theater scene bursts with so many companies and creative energies that Oregonian arts writer David Stabler has used the term “golden age” to describe the present state of affairs.⁵⁸ Among the impressive projects being undertaken by Portland’s 125 theater companies is a project, begun in 2014, to stage each of Shakespeare’s thirty-seven plays in two years. Portland Center Stage headlines the professional scene, along with Artists Repertory Theatre and Portland Playhouse. Myriad “radical, traditional, scraggly, semi-pro, full-pro, kinda-pro” companies, as Stabler calls them, round out the picture while covering most every artistic base one could imagine.

Portland’s music and dance offerings include the traditional—the Oregon Symphony, Portland Symphony Orchestra, Portland Opera, Portland Ballet Theater, etc.—but the acclaimed indie music scene has distinguished the city equally if not more, while contributing to Portland’s reputation as a mecca for young musical artists. Venues such as the Aladdin Theater, the Doug Fir Lounge, and the Crystal Ballroom (with its ornate design flourishes and famed trampoline-motion floor) host not just touring acts from elsewhere but numerous national acts that call Portland home. Livability magazine,



The Portland-based band the Decemberists in concert

Source: Photo by Sage Ross. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Accessed at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Decemberists_at_Yale,_28_April_2009_-_56.JPG.

among other publications, has named Portland one of the best music scenes outside the recognized meccas of New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville.⁵⁹

Painting, sculpture, and other fine arts flourish in the city. The Portland Art Museum offers world-class exhibits in a downtown building that itself looks like an art piece. Galleries proliferate in much of the city, particularly in the Pearl District. The city’s ubiquitous coffeehouses and restaurants often double

as galleries, adorning their walls with the works of local artists.

Also indicative of Portland's commitment to art are the impressive crowds of 2,000 or more that flock to downtown's elegant Arlene Schnitzer Theater to hear big-name authors speak under the auspices of the Portland Arts & Lectures series. Citizens' support of the series reflects a kind of underdog determination, in the view of Andrew Proctor, executive director of Literary Arts, the organization behind the series. Having worked in New York City, Proctor is keenly aware that Portland is nowhere near the first-tier literary circuit, either in size or location. Literature-loving residents and philanthropists understand that, too, Proctor observes, and know that to continue attracting literary luminaries such as Salman Rushdie and Barbara Kingsolver (to name just two of many famous authors who have spoken to series audiences in recent years), they must earnestly support the series by attending and donating.⁶⁰



Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall
Source: Photo by Andrew Parodi.
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Of course, literature and other arts do not have to compete with major league sports for attention and attendance as much as they do in most similarly sized cities. Here is another example of Portland standing out for what it lacks. The region has no franchise in major league football, baseball, or hockey. The National Basketball Association is the only one of the “big four” major sports leagues with a team in Portland. Despite going without a championship for almost forty years, the NBA's Portland Trail Blazers are a strong, well-supported franchise that has regained the city's affection after a down period marked by off-court player misbehavior that temporarily earned the team the nickname “Jail Blazers.” In keeping with Portland's determination to be different from the rest of the country, the metro area has gone crazy for professional soccer. Portlanders fill 20,000-seat Providence Park every time their beloved Major League Soccer team, the Portland Timbers, takes the pitch, while providing nearly equal support to the Portland Thorns of the National Women's Soccer League. An unusually large and well-organized supporters' club, the Timbers Army, packs one end of the stadium at Timbers games with 5,000 fans who stand, sing, chant, and wave scarves and flags for the entire ninety minutes of play, creating an environment often compared to that in the European leagues, and helping to earn Portland the title “Soccer City USA.” Reflective of the do-it-yourself spirit that pervades Portland, the crowd needs no orchestration from the public-address system, as is customary at a typical NBA or Major

League Baseball game. Indeed, the PA system is irrelevant and inaudible in the Army section, as the ultras carry on loudly with Timbers devotionals sung to melodies as quirky and diverse as the Tetris theme and “Anarchy in the UK.”

A city steeped in arts and aesthetics—this was not a fate one would have predicted for Portland forty years ago. Writing on the Portland Architecture blog, journalist Brian Libby observed that

in 1978, Portland was a very different place, whether we’re talking economically, culturally, or even its physical makeup. Many of the places that now define the city, from Waterfront Park to Pioneer Courthouse Square to the Pearl District, did not exist. Timber still dominated local industry. There was scarcely an art gallery to be found, and any right-minded artist looking for career advancement and attention knew to head for New York. The local food/drink scene was more Maxwell House, Budweiser, and Gallo than Stumptown, Widmer, and Sokol Blosser.⁶¹

In searching for a turning point or catalyst moment in the city’s development, one could point to decisions during the urban renewal push of the 1960s to raze a rundown residential area on downtown’s southern edge and, in that same neighborhood, rehabilitate the aging Civic Auditorium (today’s Keller Auditorium) and install a large and stunning public artwork now known as the Keller Fountain. Imitating the cascading waterfalls found in abundance in the nearby Columbia Gorge, the fountain honors the regional landscape and complements the city’s mountain vistas; instead of nature imitating art, the fountain represents art in imitation of nature.



Keller Fountain
Source: iStock,
photographer - Ifistand

The namesake of the arts center and fountain, Ira Keller, chaired the Portland Development Commission for fourteen years beginning with its inception in 1958, and he is credited with driving Portland’s urban renewal. Keller and his compatriots cleared the ground for urban planning and redevelopment, literally and figuratively, and a generation or two of talented planners and architects have carried on the work. Mount Hood has even played a role; to avoid blocking mountain views for wealthy Portlanders in the West Hills, the city places strict height restrictions on downtown buildings, helping give the city center a friendly, small-city feel that bears little in common with, say, the ambience of Chicago or Seattle. Among the notable architects who have worked in this “medium” called Portland are Pietro Belluschi, Michael Graves, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Nearly a half century after their creation, the cascades still flow at Keller Fountain, and the spirit that inspired them still animates arts life in Portland. In addition to the above-cited examples of a new arts

tax and subscriber devotion to the Arts & Lectures series, there are monthly arts festivals (for which city streets are closed off) such as First Thursday in the upscale Pearl District and Last Thursday across the river in the more bohemian Alberta neighborhood. The North Park Blocks (a string of city block-size parks running along the Pearl District's eastern edge) are taken over by Art in the Pearl every Labor Day weekend, and numerous other festivals dot the calendar.

In addition to art, Portland makes space for recreation. A park system often cited as one of the best in the United States boasts the world's smallest park, Mill's End, at 452 square inches about the size of a floor tile, as well as one of the largest, the aptly named Forest Park, an urban woods occupying more than 5,000 acres on the hills flanking the city's western edge. Streets are closed off periodically in summer months for large-scale bike parades known as Sunday Parkways—a headache for drivers but a boon to bicyclists.

Especially during the difficult economic slump times of the late “aughts,” many a jobless Portlander might have asked whether citizens' ample exposure to art, aesthetics, and simple fun really amounted to much. Aren't these all trivialities relative to making a good living? Yet research by the Gallup Organization suggests something that even the most no-nonsense economic growth champion could not ignore. In the words of “Soul of the Community,” a 2010 report prepared by Gallup, “Cities with the highest levels of attachment had the highest rate of GDP growth.” This civic attachment, the researchers found, owes greatly to what might be termed non-economic factors. “Social offerings, openness, and beauty are far more important than peoples' perceptions of the economy, jobs, or basic services in creating a lasting emotional bond between people and their community.”⁶²

Herein lies a clue to the logic-defying magic of Portland, and an explanation for why educated young people continue to migrate to the area, sans employment and likely with full knowledge of how much harder it can be to find a conventional well-paying job in Portland than in many other metro areas. Indeed, in the long run, no real tradeoff exists between the aesthetic and economic; rather, they have a mutually reinforcing relationship that bodes well for both the arts and the economy.

On a less positive note that will be explored later, this relationship between the aesthetic and the economic extends logically to the equity problems discussed throughout this report. Just as the city's economic vitality has eluded pockets of the population, so has the city's artistic quality. In other words, for the “invisible” and forgotten Portlanders, immersion in the Portland aesthetic is most decidedly not their experience.

Credit is due city leaders for incorporating consideration of arts and culture into the long-range planning embodied in the Portland Plan. As the plan authors note, “Typically long-range city development plans address topics like economic development, community design, and even health, to name a few common planning themes. While those... are essential to creating a prosperous and healthy city, Portlanders are concerned about more than typical planning issues.... Creative expression is important to Portlanders.”⁶³ As it has been to the city's planners and shapers—to the benefit of the greater Portland area and those who populate it.

“THE PROSPEROUS”: THE REALM OF ECONOMIC LIFE

Urban planning scholar Carl Abbott writes that Portland, with a steady economy rooted in the land and a habit of avoiding boom-bust economic cycles, can be thought of as the turtle, and Seattle the hare. (If only this generally valid observation had held true during the Great Recession, which the Portland area definitely did not avoid.) In addition to analogizing from the fable to which Abbott alludes, one can conjure all manner of comparisons between Portland and its flashier West Coast rivals: Portland, the “country bumpkin” cousin with its farms-and-logs heritage; Portland, the plodding, land-bound “infantry” outgunned by Seattle and its high-flying aerospace industry; Portland, the poor “stepchild” with a per capita income well below that of Seattle or San Francisco.

All these contrasts might suggest inferiority and envy—and, yes, one sometimes hears grumbling from the Portland Business Alliance and other mainstream commercial interests about the hipsters, liberal arts grads, and artisan entrepreneurs who seem aggressively uninterested in keeping up with the Joneses when it comes to high salaries, corporate ladders, and economic growth-as-usual. Such were the headlines in 2013 when a business coalition released results of a study of wage suppression in the Rose City and the reasons why the per capita income there lagged behind the national average. The culprit? As *The Oregonian's* Betsy Hammond reported, “Portlanders tend to choose majors, careers, and work hours that lead to low pay. [The study] portrays greater Portland as populated by humanities majors, designers, artists, and teachers who work and earn less than in the vast majority of metropolitan areas.”⁶⁴

The study and subsequent handwringing recalled an episode witnessed by this writer at a promote-Portland planning meeting where a group of people from city hall, the business sector, and the marketing community came together to plot messaging strategy in the hope of luring new businesses. When some meeting participants started enthusing about the region's quality of life and recreation—skiing and snowboarding, hiking and climbing, fun at the nearby coast—a few from the business side voiced nervous objections. Let's be hush-hush about all that fun, they warned; we don't want potential corporate newcomers to think our work force here has too many interests outside of working long hours!

But in Portland, the “workaholic” life calls fewer than in some other parts of the country. And if one were to ask one of those underemployed humanities grads whether she and her city were prosperous, the reply might well go like this: “Is Portland prosperous? Define ‘prosperous’!”

Moreover, Portland's economy, while not as high-octane as those of Seattle and San Francisco, is far from moribund. Although the area's unemployment rate outpaced the national average during the recession, the jobs picture has brightened significantly as the economy has recovered. Oregon was a top-three state for job growth in 2013, behind only Florida and North Dakota, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, with Portland enjoying its share of that growth.⁶⁵ Other sources find Portland-area job growth outpacing the statewide average, with the metro area's unemployment rate reaching a five-year low of 6.6 percent at the end of 2013.⁶⁶ The rate continued to decline during 2014, dropping to 5.8 percent by year's end.⁶⁷ (Aggregate unemployment rates are useful only to a degree, of course; the rates for Latinos and African Americans have been much higher in both the state and the metro area. For example, statewide figures at one point in 2012 showed an 8.7 percent unemployment rates for whites, 11.4 percent for Latinos, and 18.4 percent for African Americans.⁶⁸)

The notion of Portland as a cow-town opposite of the Bay Area and Seattle is increasingly outdated. While exports of hazelnuts, grains, and wood products (often to Asian markets) have contributed robust job and exports growth to the metro region and the state, agricultural and extractive industries do not dominate economic activity as they have in the past. Computer chips and other tech products also course out of Portland for domestic and international destinations. Led by a large Intel complex in the western suburb of Hillsboro, tech innovation and manufacturing are flourishing in the metropolitan region. Tektronix, a manufacturer of test and measurement equipment, also based in the western suburbs, has helped solidify the region's tech and employment base, as has the iconic Nike, a global leader in athletic technology, manufacturing, and fashion and one of several sports-gear companies with a large Portland-area presence. Richard Florida ranks the Portland area fourth in the nation on his “technology index.”⁶⁹ (Intel is, in fact, the metro area's largest employer; also in the top five are Providence Health System, Oregon Health & Science University, the federal government, and the Fred Meyer retail chain.⁷⁰)

Greater Portland's performance as an international exporter has also caught the attention of leading urbanists. Metropolitan policy analysts Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley describe the greater Portland area as “one of America's most export-oriented and globally integrated economies.”⁷¹ With 18 percent of the gross metropolitan product coming from exports, they add, the Portland area boasts the third-highest “export intensity” in the United States and the second-fastest-growing export market.

Clean technology, along with expertise in sustainability planning and practices, drives Portland's economy as well. This can be thought of as an intellectual export—minds, know-how, and experience that are increasingly in demand in other cities as they move toward greener infrastructure and buildings. As former mayor Sam Adams points out, this ethic and strength are also reflected in the unglamorous fact that the metro region's top export product is scrap metal. "We are, in our bones, a sustainable and recycling city," Adams says.⁷²

The picture that emerges from all of this is of a Portland-area economy that is fairly diversified; the same could not be said of the city's tax profile, which is heavily dependent on property taxes. Oregon has no sales tax and, thus, no sales tax revenue to share with Portland-area cities. In fiscal year 2012-13, property tax revenue accounted for some 91 percent of general revenue to the Portland city coffers. Rounding out the revenue stream were proceeds from lodging taxes, investment earnings, and miscellaneous taxes.⁷³ As the Portland Bureau of Revenue and Financial Services notes, past ballot measures have constrained the city's ability to increase property tax revenue to keep pace with demand for services; increases in user fees, business license fees, and the like have not been adequate to fill the gap. As a result, "since 2001, the City has had to reduce costs and service levels," the bureau reports. "This is a result of decreased revenues compared to inflation that resulted from the impact of the economic recession on city, county, state and federal budgets, as well as escalating costs coming from the health care industry."⁷⁴

To be sure, the absence of a sales tax brings relief to lower-income residents, as does the reliance on income taxes, which by their nature operate on the principle of "make more, pay more." Those state incomes tax rates are, in fact, among the highest in the nation—9.0 percent for earnings between \$8,000 and \$125,000 and 9.9 percent for earnings over \$125,000. Mitigating the threat of income tax flight to nearby Washington is the stipulation that people pay Oregon incomes taxes on the basis of where they work, not where they reside.

Despite the absence of a state sales tax, and despite limits on the amount by which property taxes can rise in a given year, Oregon's tax structure takes a toll on lower-income people and exacerbates problems from gentrification and displacement to low rates of minority homeownership. As has been well documented through decades of observation and research, property taxes become particularly burdensome for certain populations—people with fixed incomes, for example—as these taxes rise along with property values. This process plays into a growing housing affordability problem affecting renters and owners alike. In one evaluation done in early 2014, slightly over half the homes in the metro area were deemed unaffordable, a finding that confirmed Portland as one of only seven major metropolitan areas in the country with that dubious distinction.⁷⁵ For middle-class homeowners and renters, paying more for housing may pose an inconvenience and a strain; for lower-income residents, often minorities and immigrants, rising costs put once affordable housing entirely out of reach. Census data show that the percentage of African Americans owning homes slid from 38.2 percent in 2000 to 29.5 percent in 2014, a trend with ominous implications for an already-small black middle class.⁷⁶ According to the housing affordability brief prepared for the Portland Plan,

While the housing supply has grown by several thousand units a year and existing housing has been improved, the cost of this new or renovated housing has usually been higher than [that of] the housing it replaced or the housing before improvement, which has resulted in a loss of affordable units available to both homebuyers and renters, particularly in Portland's centrally located neighborhoods. At the same time, household incomes have not kept pace with rising housing prices and rents, so that more Portland households are paying a higher percentage of their incomes for housing.⁷⁷

As the authors of this document suggest, many Portland-area residents appear to be experiencing their own personal version of city hall's revenue problem. As already mentioned, incomes trend low in Portland relative to those in the city's West Coast rivals. Common wisdom suggests that a relatively low cost of living mitigates the effects of wage suppression in Portland to a degree—but the emphasis here must be placed on "relatively." It is no doubt easier to finance life in Portland than in famously

expensive cities like San Francisco or New York. Yet despite Portland's reputation as a place where semi-employed artists and indie rock musicians can make ends meet, Portland is not exactly cheap. In part because of its housing affordability problems, the metro area's overall cost of living is roughly 7 percent above the national average.⁷⁸ In view of projections of major population growth in the coming decades, it seems likely that Portland and environs will become even less affordable in the future. Yet complicating these scenarios in a hopeful way is the emergence of another layer of economic life. Portland's resourceful artisans, artists, and street entrepreneurs seem to be operating on a different wavelength, eschewing material acquisition and upward mobility while contributing to and benefiting from an intriguing form of "social wealth" that escapes conventional economic measurement. Writers such as Adam Davidson of the New York Times document an emerging economic trend or ethic around the country that finds people innovating and working outside the corporate mainstream, pursuing happiness as much as profit. "The hot field of happiness economics argues, rather persuasively, that once people reach some level of comfort, they are willing—even eager—to trade in potential earnings at a lucrative but uninspiring job for less (but comfortable) pay at more satisfying work," Davidson writes.⁷⁹ Locally based writers including Brian Libby and Charles Heying have documented the phenomenon in Portland, which has become a leading site for artisan and small-entrepreneur economies.

Libby addresses Portland's relative dearth of corporate clout in optimistic terms:

Much as we may desire more Fortune 500 companies to bring jobs to an underemployed metro area, the reason the city is seeing a migration of college-educated, creative-industry denizens is that Portland has earned the distinction of being a different kind of place, where making money may still be important, but not at the price of a saccharine lifestyle of automobile gridlock and eyesore strip malls. It's not where you'll get rich, the thinking goes, but where you'll have a life on your own terms.⁸⁰

As Heying explores in his book *Brew to Bikes: Portland's Artisan Economy*, the notion of life on one's own terms goes beyond independence and self-seeking. Heying, a member of the urban studies faculty at Portland State, describes a social wealth and communal ethic that flourish in networks of local craftspeople who consume each other's goods and services and take care of the shared spaces in their neighborhoods. "Other cities have their bohemian districts," Heying writes, "but Portland stands alone as an urban economy that has broadly embraced the artisan approach to living and working.... It's localism without parochialism."⁸¹

Like Libby, Heying is among those Portlanders unperturbed by the lack of corporate headquarters in and around the Rose City. "If there were a Fortune 500 of artisan enterprises," he writes, "Portland would seem to have more than its share." Although the dynamic leaves the region with shallow pockets for large-scale philanthropy and other civic projects, Heying astutely notes an upside—an economic and cultural vacuum of sorts where the artisan economy has rushed in and flourished. "Perhaps the absence of elite leadership and Portland's backwater status as a branch-plant city has been its salvation," he writes. "Citizens have come forward to fill the breach, and artisans have been forced to build a homegrown, self-sustaining economy."⁸²

Intriguingly—and paradoxically—Portland's aesthetic and natural endowments (including the cooler weather and abundant water supplies) are making the city attractive to more-upscale immigrants as well. Lost in the national narrative about Portland as a haven for bearded artisan-economy liberals is the little-reported fact that, beginning in the last decade, people of wealth started migrating there. In January 2014, *Portland Monthly* reported that by tracking federal tax-revenue data, one could clearly see a reversal of a long pattern of Portland losing people and wealth to the Southwest; now, the opposite was happening, with Portland gaining nearly \$70 million in annual income from migrants arriving from California, Arizona, and New Mexico.⁸³

Thus appears the question that so often faces appealing smaller communities as word spreads and newcomers arrive: Can the Portland metro area accommodate all this population growth—including

the new arrivals of wealth—and retain the quality of life and ethos that account for its distinctive attractiveness? With population projected to grow dramatically in the coming decades, can Portland remain “livable” and feasible for less wealthy citizens?

Another cause for concern is a tendency noted by business interests and employment growth advocates that finds city decision-makers placing perhaps too little sustained emphasis on attracting and retaining businesses and helping spur jobs growth. This persistent worry could be plainly heard in the responses to Mayor Hales’s listing of his top priorities for 2014. Among them was a shift away from an emphasis on job creation by the Portland Development Commission and toward “place-making,” this shift coming just a few years after the commission took on jobs as its chief priority. Admittedly, the employment picture has improved dramatically since the bottom of the recession—a trend that correlated with the commission’s shift in focus from urban renewal to attracting businesses and supporting native entrepreneurs. Those placing a high priority on job growth could be forgiven, however, if they felt frustrated by the mayor’s apparent complacency. Was job growth now being relegated again in favor of the trendy?

As the Oregonian editorial board grouched,

With the recession in the rearview mirror, the mayor is trying to steer the agency back toward Portland’s natural inclination to focus on creating the type of urban environment its leaders prefer.... The message Portland sends to potential employers matters—especially in a city not exactly known for rolling out the red carpet to businesses.... City leaders need to spend as much time studying employment charts as they do analyzing density statistics and environmental impact statements.⁸⁴

This dynamic, and the larger tensions it reveals between aesthetics, on one hand, and “fundamentals” like job growth, on the other, is a fascinating aspect of today’s Portland, and one that will be explored again later in this profile.

“THE SUSTAINABLE”: THE REALM OF NATURAL RESOURCES, HEALTH, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Describing the elusive interplay among the factors that determine whether cities thrive, sociologist Josh Yates extols “those rare and unusual coalitions of residents that unpredictably spring up from time to time, bridging social sectors, classes, racial and ethnic divisions, and even metaphysical commitments.”⁸⁵ Greater Portland experienced such a moment, and sprouted such a coalition, at a pivotal moment in the region’s history. More than forty years later, residents still enjoy the results. To understand this story of Portland and sustainability, it is important to bear in mind a seeming paradox that has been important to Portland’s success and its renown as a smart, well-planned community. As former mayor Sam Adams points out, Portland innovates to preserve—in particular, to preserve the valuable natural endowments surrounding its built environment.⁸⁶

This “innovation for preservation” story began unfolding in the early 1970s, when Portland, an unremarkable provincial city, became a site of surprising coalitions and community consensus regarding some important concepts that were emerging around the country—namely, the idea that the natural environment was worth protecting, and that city cores ought to be revitalized rather than abandoned for the literally greener pastures on the metro periphery. These ideas were hardly confined to Portland, of course. But perhaps more than any other major metro area in the United States, the Portland region got traction and took action to implement the concept. “Portland stood out not for the content of its vision,” Carl Abbott writes, “but for its effectiveness in transforming what was becoming a new orthodoxy into a comprehensive set of public policies for constructing long-lived political coalitions around several planning goals.”⁸⁷

Crucial to this success was the fashioning of an “unusual coalition,” to use Yates’s term, that

linked agricultural and extractive-industry interests (often conservative) with city-dwelling environmentalists and urban-planning devotees and sympathizers (often liberal).

The most tangible and enduring outcomes of this coalition of strange bedfellows were these three pivotal decisions: (a) to scrap plans for a freeway running east toward Mount Hood, with much of the money devoted instead to light rail; (b) to replace a riverfront expressway on the Willamette's west bank with a waterfront park, named for reporter-turned-governor Tom McCall, whose reports on Willamette River pollution propelled him to local prominence; and, perhaps most important, (c) to create an urban growth boundary, which today still contains urban sprawl and spurs development within designated growth areas. As a result, the rich farmland surrounding the metro area continues to produce food for the city's kitchens and tables; the wild, natural areas close to the city remain a largely unspoiled playground for hikers and scenery seekers; and several once decrepit districts of the city have been reborn, bringing forth dynamic mixes of offices, shops, galleries, and restaurants. To understand the developments of the 1970s that led to designation of Portland's urban growth boundary and other manifestations of sustainability leadership, one must look back to the 1800s. Since the Lewis and Clark expedition, which reached the area in 1805, white explorers, pioneers, and romanticists have idealized the lush Willamette Valley and the forested mountains on its eastern and western edges. Carl Abbott documents early notions of the region as an Eden of unusual promise and beauty that beckoned in stark contrast to the "arid plains, parched plateaus, and inhospitable mountains that lay between the Mississippi Valley and the Pacific shore."⁸⁸

This reverence for the land still pulsed strongly during the political maneuvering that established the growth boundary in the 1970s. The boundary was "a means to an end," says Ethan Seltzer, an urban studies professor at Portland State and often-cited expert on the growth boundary's role in Portland's development. "The point was to call an end to farmland development and [to protect] the incredible landscape of the Willamette Valley. This is not a city that stands back and looks at its skyline and says, 'What a great city!' It's a city that stands back and says, 'Look at those mountains!'"⁸⁹

Protecting those mountains, as it turned out, also served to catalyze the development of a vibrant built environment in the most densely populated area of the region.

Given the biblical connotations of the term Eden, it is fitting that the visionary behind the preserve-and-protect movement of the 1960s and '70s framed the issue as a moral imperative and pressed for it with the zeal of an Old Testament prophet. Tom McCall, with his "jeremiads" against the evils of sprawl, against the potential despoiling of this Eden, found sympathetic ears among the Oregonians on the receiving end of his preaching. This was due to more than residents' ingrained reverence for the area's natural beauty. In overcoming the political opposition of developers and individual-rights advocates, the governor was also tapping into a long tradition of "moralistic" politics in the state, one evoked by the challenge from Lewis Mumford—"Are you good enough?"—that introduces this profile.

Landmark state legislation passed in 1973—the Land Conservation and Development Act—required every city and county to develop a comprehensive plan for land use, including an urban growth boundary. Wasting little time, the new guard in charge at Portland City Hall (led by the talented young mayor, Neil Goldschmidt) seized the political moment and established the metro area's growth boundary.

Four decades later, the Portland metro-area growth boundary holds—but threats to its viability appear to be growing. A population increase of as many as 750,000 is projected for the coming decades. This prompts the obvious question: Where will all these new residents live and work? One logical answer, it would seem, is higher buildings and more density in the core urban areas. Yet here, too, the picture is complicated. Activists in Northwest Portland and the Pearl District have begun using a new term in their fight against the taller buildings sprouting or proposed in their neighborhoods: "vertical sprawl."

Also clouding the picture of this mostly good-news story of sustainability and the urban growth boundary is the race dimension. One part of Yates's "bridging" concept has not been present in a robust

way—the part about coalitions that bridge racial and ethnic divisions. One reason Portland was able to implement “smart planning” more effectively than most places was the relative lack, or invisibility, of such tensions and divisions. This was not due to any special virtue on Portland’s part but, quite the opposite, because of the small populations of African Americans, Latinos, and other racial minorities in a city that has been dubbed the “whitest in America.” In essence, Portland could sidestep race equity on its way to the green ideal, and it continues to sidestep it today to some measure. This remains a “hole in Portland’s game,” to borrow a term from sports, and a challenge it must address if it is to live up to its progressive values and sustainability commitments more fully.

By conventional sustainability measures, Portland stands as something of a superstar, “a beacon of sustainable urban development and sustainable lifestyles,” in the words of researchers Amy Lubitow and Thaddeus R. Miller.⁹⁰ Various rankings identify Portland as best, or among the best, for organic farmers’ markets, bicycle commuting and bicycle friendliness, and green buildings, among other community assets. The recycling rate, not surprisingly, is among the highest in the country—59.3 percent in 2011⁹¹—and the city is pushing to raise it to 75 percent. In addition to serving as something of a think tank and model for the development of green power and clean technology, Portland also uses a great deal of alternative energy. For example, a city ordinance—the first of its type in the country—requires all diesel fuel and gasoline sold in Portland filling stations to include baseline amounts of ethanol and biodiesel.

As Lubitow and Miller note, the Portland metro area has the nation’s only elected regional governing entity (the aptly named “Metro”; for more on this unique jurisdiction, see <http://www.oregonmetro.gov/regional-leadership/what-metro>), and the first city agency dedicated to sustainability, the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. In recognition of these efforts and more, SustainLane designated Portland America’s most sustainable city in 2008.⁹²

In the midst of all this green virtue, it comes as an unpleasant surprise that the Portland area does not have especially clean air. For example, on the American Lung Association’s lists of metro areas with the cleanest air, as measured by ozone levels, year-round particle pollution, and short-term particle pollution, greater Portland is nowhere to be found.⁹³ Carbon emissions, on the other hand, have been decreasing over recent decades, Portlanders produce 26 percent fewer carbon emissions now than in 1990 (while emissions have increased nationally).⁹⁴ Further evidence that the metro area is far from being a utopia is that fact that the city has catalogued some 910 acres of brownfields⁹⁵—a relatively small amount, to be sure, but a reminder that not all is perfect in the green mecca. A similar situation prevails with respect to water. Although most local residents swear by the fresh taste of Portland’s tap water, a water quality score assigned by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency places it slightly below the national average.⁹⁶ The city’s iconic waterway, the Willamette River, has had a deserved reputation for poor quality due in part to sewage overflows. That situation is improving since the completion of a massive sewage system overhaul, including completion of the West Side Combined Sewer Overflow Tunnel (also known as “The Big Pipe Project”) in 2011.⁹⁷

The Portland metropolitan area fares well, for the most part, in regard to access to medical care. The area has a relatively robust ratio of 326 physicians per 100,000 people, and roughly 91 percent of the population has medical insurance.⁹⁸ The state runs a “Healthy Kids” program that provides care to uninsured children and teenagers. These resources, combined with outdoors- and fitness-oriented lifestyles, contribute to Portland’s high status in various “healthy city” rankings by information and news outlets including NerdWallet and Forbes.⁹⁹

Portland-area residents enjoy a plethora of healthy food options, although less so in parts of the city with higher concentrations of low-income residents and people of color. Numerous farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture programs keep Portlanders supplied with fresh produce, meats, and other agricultural products from local farms. In addition to giving customers an enjoyable, festival-like experience, the farmers’ markets create a mutually reinforcing cycle that enhances the region’s food sustainability and pleases citizens’ taste buds. Cooking Light magazine deems Portland fourth in the nation for farmers’ markets per capita, and first in organic restaurants.¹⁰⁰ Growing

numbers of homeowners within the city limits have taken the locavore ethic to its zenith, turning their yards into small farms complete with bees and chickens.

Like many of the other compelling features of greater Portland, the assets described above can be attributed to the area's advantageous setting and a series of smart decisions that have both preserved and leveraged the geographical riches. Yet, as is the case for the other endowment areas described in this report, the picture of health and vibrancy is incomplete; those benefiting from the bright dynamic are, by and large, white Portlanders. People of color and immigrants tend to live outside the virtuous, healthy loops that made the region one of America's greenest and healthiest.

As Marcus Mundy, then president of the city's Urban League, observed in a speech at the league's annual banquet several years ago, Portland indeed is a site of progressive virtue if one is interested in old-growth forests, spotted owls, and such—but not, he asserted, if one's concern is for racial equity. Mundy's point rings true, and it manifests itself in myriad ways, including, for example, metrics showing much higher rates of food insecurity, infant mortality, obesity, and premature death from diabetes among Oregonians of color than whites. As the Regional Equity Atlas reports, "Many neighborhoods with high percentages of low-income populations and people of color also have poor access to parks, nature, and other forms of green space."¹⁰¹

For deeper insight on the less than inclusive breadth of the Portland dream, and the tensions that can arise as a result, consider the politics of urban bicycling—in particular, a revealing case study from earlier in this decade. As reported by study authors Lubitow and Miller, the largely white bicycling advocacy community was surprised to encounter significant neighborhood opposition to a city plan to improve a twenty-eight-block-long bikeway in Northeast Portland. What the cycling advocates had assumed was non-controversial and non-political—merely a project to enhance safe, enjoyable, and efficient bicycle transportation—turned out to be freighted with politics. The planning process, according to the researchers, "became a contested venue in which larger concerns over racism, gentrification, and historical inequities took center stage."¹⁰² A lack of diversity on the project advisory committee evoked pent-up resentments and painful memories of ways in which the concerns of African Americans in Northeast Portland have been swept aside through waves of urban renewal and gentrification. Standing in the black residents' shoes for a moment, one can readily understand the frustration they experience as Portland races ahead with top-class bike lanes and other seemingly



Portland: one of the most bike-friendly cities in the U.S.
Source: iStock, photographer – Tim Newman

trendy elements of the green dream. As opponents of the bike lanes projects asked, were the struggles of the black community going to be relegated to the back burner yet again in pursuit of something beneficial and attractive mainly to white Portlanders?

The tragedy in this is that bicycling can be a benefit enjoyed by people of all races, especially in view

of its relatively low cost. Fortunately, through the efforts of organizations such as the Community Cycling Center (whose CEO, Mychal Tetteh, is black), Portland's bicycling community is evolving to include more and more people of color, and to equip more members of racial and ethnic minorities with the bicycles, tools, and skills needed to participate in this iconic aspect of Portland life. Nationally, bicycling is growing fastest among African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans.¹⁰³ In an interesting twist, much of it happens "contrary to infrastructure," in the terminology of cycling experts, meaning that these cyclists often eschew designated routes and their tidy bicycling lanes and instead take the most direct route they can devise, often traveling on less safe roadways and using sidewalks where possible.¹⁰⁴

To researchers Lubitow and Miller, the bicycle lanes controversy framed a wider problem with the way sustainability is pursued in Portland and elsewhere. They cite a tendency to concentrate on "issues amenable to technological solutions, such as energy efficiency upgrades or even transportation infrastructure, [which] are able to move forward while thorny political issues regarding race and inequality are sidestepped."¹⁰⁵ (Their point resonates with an experience I had several years ago while reporting on an East Portland community event attended by large numbers of Latinos. A community resources room included a large display where attendees could name the "sustainability" issues most important to them. The usual categories were on the board but received few votes: energy efficiency, climate change, etc. The winner, far and away, was jobs.)

The Northeast Portland bicycle lanes controversy had a positive ending that points the way toward a form of sustainability that is more holistic, justice oriented, and inclusive—and conducive to closer adherence by Portland to its progressive values. After residents' grievances and objections surfaced, the process was restarted. This time, dialogue sessions included acknowledgment of the pain caused by gentrification and racial discrimination. The project advisory committee was reconstituted to include more minority members. The plans, Lubitow and Miller report, were redrafted in a unique fashion that attempted to balance the needs of all stakeholders and modes of transportation, while the contestation of the process itself served to generate broader discussions of the social aspects of sustainability (e.g., access to jobs, affordable housing, business loans for minorities). What began as a quick and "easy" transportation project blossomed into a much larger conversation about the social sustainability of neighborhoods and ultimately led to an alternative design for the project—one that included values and concerns related to equality and justice.¹⁰⁶

These lessons about the justice element of Portland's sustainability are important to bear in mind as this profile now turns to its final endowment section.

"THE JUST AND WELL-ORDERED": THE REALM OF POLITICAL AND CIVIC LIFE

Portland is a city that some residents praise as a kind of Eden: full of bike paths, independently owned small businesses, great public transportation, and abundant microbreweries and coffee shops. And then there's a whole other city... the city where some longtime African American residents feel as if decades of institutional racism still have not been fully addressed.

—From "Portland, OR: A Tale of Two Cities," an episode in *State of the Re-union*, a radio series¹⁰⁷

If Portland metropolitan-area politics were a car, the left-turn signal would wear out from overuse long before the right. The "communitarian" politics are so alarming to conservative pundit George Will that he likens the Portland ethos to a disease and worries about its "metastasizing" to other parts of the country.¹⁰⁸ One might disagree with Will's negative response. But the facts bear out that Portland politics, while not as extreme as Will suggests, indeed do run toward the liberal and Democratic. Each of the representatives Portland sends to the state legislature and the U.S. Congress is a Democrat; so are the state's two U.S. senators. In the area's most urban and populous county, Multnomah, voters have overwhelmingly voted for Democratic nominees for president in every election going back to the 1980s. Registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans in Multnomah County 237,402 to 69,212 in a February 2013 count, with 109,075 registered as unaffiliated. Republicans fare considerably better in suburban

Washington County, which in the same report logged 112,777 Democrats, 87,464 Republicans, and 70,360 unaffiliated voters.¹⁰⁹ The political situation is a dramatic reverse from the 1960s and before, when, as the Portland Tribune puts it, “Portland politics were dominated by conservative businessmen, and the City Council carried out the wishes of the Chamber of Commerce.”¹¹⁰

Political participation rates, statewide and in the Portland area, have been flagged as an area of concern in studies by such organizations as Greater Portland Pulse and the Regional Equity Atlas. On the positive side, voter turnout, aided by the state’s unique vote-by-mail method, trends high in Oregon relative to other states; 73 percent of registered Oregon voters turned out in the 2010 election, for example, and 74 percent in the Portland metro area, specifically.¹¹¹ However, the picture is somewhat less impressive when it comes to the percentage of eligible voters who are registered to vote, especially with respect to those who are members of minority groups and in lower income brackets. In its “Facing Race” report, the group Basic Rights Oregon reported with concern the voter registration rates of blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans (69.7%, 59.4%, and 55.9%, respectively), all lower than the 73.5% rate for whites. Whereas 85 percent of eligible voters in households making \$100,000 or more were registered, the report found, the rate was only 65% for those in households with income of less than \$25,000 a year.¹¹²

A mapping tool employed by the Coalition for a Livable Future demonstrates that, for the most part, voter registration and turnout are greater in census blocks whose residents display characteristics such as greater incomes and higher levels of educational attainment. Not surprisingly, the converse reveals itself in parts of the city with high concentrations of minority and immigrant populations and lower income levels; there, one finds less voter participation.¹¹³ Against this backdrop, Oregon in March 2015 enacted a first-of-its-kind law by which the state automatically registers adult citizens who do business with the Department of Motor Vehicles. The new law was expected to lead to the registration of 300,000 new voters across the state.¹¹⁴

Voting is, of course, just one means of civic involvement. As cited earlier, the metro area and state cultivate and benefit from a culture of volunteerism. Portland proper also has encouraged and achieved high degrees of neighborhood organizing and clear pathways for citizen input on decision making at city hall. The Office of Neighborhood Involvement recognizes and funds ninety-five neighborhood associations, each acting as an official liaison to city government. (Another unusual aspect of the way civic government is organized in Portland is its commission form of government, in which city commissioners are elected at large on a nonpartisan basis and handle administrative duties in addition to legislative responsibilities.)

Criminal justice has emerged as a contested area of civic life that exposes many of the unresolved concerns about race inequities. Not that Portland is a high-crime area in the aggregate. On the contrary, data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation show that Portland proper is among the safest of the seventy-five largest American cities when it comes to violent crime. It is, in fact, ranked sixth lowest in murder and non-negligent manslaughter, with 3.3 incidents per 100,000 residents.¹¹⁵ The issue, rather, is the interaction between the largely white police force and African Americans. Do the police prey on black men in their patrolling and arrest practices? Are they significantly more likely to use lethal force against blacks? These questions have smoldered for years, and they flare up anew each time news breaks about a police shooting or beating of a person (usually a young man) of color. A list maintained by the Portland Copwatch project finds one or more people dying each year in shootings involving Portland police.¹¹⁶ A few cases have become highly publicized, including the fatal shooting of an unarmed twenty-five-year-old black man named Aaron Campbell in 2010 and the fatal shooting of a white, mentally disabled forty-two-year-old man, James Philip Chasse Jr., in 2006. (The Chasse case is the subject of a documentary film, *Alien Boy*.) In neither of these cases have the involved officers faced criminal penalties.¹¹⁷

Exacerbating tensions are incarceration patterns and expenditures that have given Oregon the dubious distinction of being one of a handful of states that spend more public dollars on the prison system than on higher education.¹¹⁸ That system, as of February 2015, held nearly 15,000 inmates, 91

percent of them men.¹¹⁹ Blacks are disproportionately represented in the state's prisons, making up 9.4 percent of the incarcerated population in late 2013; by comparison just 2.0 percent of the Oregon population as a whole is behind bars.¹²⁰

For most Portlanders, most of the time, the positive portrait conveyed throughout this profile holds true when the discussion turns to public safety and good governance. They tend to experience Portland as a safe, pleasant city and metro area that, while far from perfect, are competently and conscientiously managed. The most realistic crime threats for most are property crimes such as bicycle thefts and car break-ins. In Portland proper, city government structures and traditions “go the extra mile” to invite and consider citizens' concerns and opinions in decision making. Portlanders have little to worry about by way of corruption involving their public officials. Portland lacks the large pockets of concentrated poverty that plague many cities and turn large sections of town into “war zones.”¹²¹ For muckrakers, controversy-mongers, and crime reporters, Portland and its environs must be downright boring.

Yet, largely out of sight, swaths of the population are living a far less happy version of the Portland experience. Embedded in their story is a past scarred by virulent racism, complete with policies and practices designed to keep away and even scare off black people, and a present that finds the Portland dream out of reach for a significant share of African American and Latino residents.

In Oregon Humanities magazine, novelist and Portland native Mitchell S. Jackson, an African American, considers the “Street of Dreams” event held annually in the city's affluent West Hills neighborhoods. The event opens impressively designed and decorated homes to public visits. “They build a new Street of Dreams every year,” writes Jackson, “a street, that is, for someone else's dreams.”¹²²

A city of dreams—a city, that is, for someone else's dreams. A slight modification of Jackson's phrase, this would be an apt description of the Portland experience—more nightmare than dream—conjured in Jackson's haunting 2013 novel *The Residue Years*. In this Portland, the green, fresh living, the bicycling and organic farmers' markets, the hoisting of pints of craft beer at sidewalk tables, are nowhere to be found. Rather, life grinds on under bleak gray skies and the weight of drug dealing and crack smoking, long bus commutes to depressing jobs, and the ripping apart of families. The white people who pop in and out of the story appear blandly nice and utterly oblivious, except for the one who eventually swindles Jackson's autobiographical protagonist.

Numerous nonfiction testimonials bear further witness to the grim picture of life in the “other” Portland. In the foreword to the Urban League's State of Black Oregon report, released during the Great Recession, state senator Margaret Carter declared, “At a time when many have to reassess the extent of their dreams, the extent of their resources and hopes, African Americans are often the first to be unemployed; the first to suffer from discrimination in a society that still struggles to break out of the legacies of segregation, Jim Crow, redlining of neighborhoods, and exclusions from education.”¹²³

Much of this “other” Portland is shoved out of sight to the non-trendy outer east edge of the city, by processes more subtle than the explicit racism of the past but nearly as effective. In a strange inside-out rendition of America's urban struggles, Portland has pushed the “inner city” to the outer city. But while those environs are easily avoided by those living the Portland dream in close-in neighborhoods, the existence of this “other” Portland is a reality that cannot be ignored. Until Portland applies its renowned problem-solving and smart-planning skills to this challenge, whether through government, activism, volunteerism, education, or all of these, it cannot be said to be a completely just and well-ordered community, or a place that fully cultivates the common good.

A case can be made for pessimism. In this scenario, those steeped in Portlandia will not see fit to spare a moment from their quirky fun—from the experience of Portland as a “playground for grownups,” as some phrase it—to tutor poor kids, protect sex-trafficked girls, take in foster kids, or advocate for policies to stem gentrification and displacement. To reprise the observation of Ben Sand of the Portland Leadership Foundation, if Portland's success story no longer burns so brightly in coming decades, it will likely be due to “selfishness” on the part of those whose hands were needed but who could not be bothered.

But so, too, can one conjure an optimistic vision for a more just Portland-of-the-future that comes closer to achieving the common good. The very existence of the relatively new Portland Leadership Foundation points to the proliferation of social purpose organizations in greater Portland and the abundance of earnest social entrepreneurs dedicated to positive change. They are cause for hope. In a similar vein, Portland, with its progressive political ethos and commitments to cultivating the public good, is a city with its heart in the right place. It is hardly in need of a new set of values; it just needs to live up to its existing values and commitments more fully.

Mayor Hales made precisely that point in his 2014 State of the City address, emphasizing the equity work that remains unfinished, the need for Portlanders to own up to the disturbing aspects of the city's past, and the imperative to implement their ideals. "We need," the mayor declared, "to put our progressive values into practice."¹²⁴

Although the city's critics rightly chide Portlanders for ignoring the racial injustices under their proverbial noses, one cannot help but hear the beginning of a more candid public conversation about race—and even some action. The Portland Development Commission, for example, now acknowledges the role that its practices have played in gentrification and displacement, and it has pledged stepped-up efforts to help place people in jobs in North and Northeast Portland. Equity is fully integrated and strongly emphasized in the official blueprint for the city's future, the Portland Plan. Diversity is growing inexorably in the metro area's demographics, making it increasingly difficult for civic leaders to relegate equity issues to the back burner. And the largely white population appears to be under no self-congratulatory illusions about race; a poll by Oregon Public Broadcasting, released in September 2014, found that 72 percent of Oregonians believe that a significant amount of racial discrimination exists in society today.¹²⁵

Although the equity dialogue seems frustrating and fractured at this point, "monologues in the guise of a conversation," in the words of David Leslie of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon,¹²⁶ one can take heart in knowing that the conversation has at least started, and that candid acknowledgment of a problem is always the first step toward its amelioration.

III. CONCLUSION

If the ballroom full of City Club participants needed any reminding about the interrelatedness of seemingly separate issues, they received it terms they could relate to at a spring 2014 edition of the club's Friday Forum. The topic: the state of the regional economy. The particular issue being addressed by panelists at the moment: Portland-area per capita income rates that lag behind the national average. The speaker: the president and CEO of a commercial real estate developer. Her point: Many Portlanders might consider themselves too evolved to care, but if the metro region could somehow close the income gap that separates its college-educated workers from their counterparts in the rest of the nation, an additional \$110 million would be available annually for the state's underfunded public schools.¹²⁷

The marshaling of this data point by Vanessa Sturgeon of TMZ Development was memorable for, among other reasons, its effectiveness in pointing out a progressive cost that is paid—namely, less money for public education—for a regional shortcoming that some might dismiss as a concern mainly for pro-business conservatives. So, too, does the episode serve as a useful illustration of the web of relationships among the endowment areas explored in this report. Truly, everything affects everything. Whether one is exploring the relationship between the environment and the economy, or between education and corrections, or between geography and demography, it eventually emerges that a metric taking a bad turn in one area is likely to trigger a negative domino effect, just as an advance in one realm of civic life promises a virtuous chain reaction affecting many others.

Through this lens, those trying to understand the anatomy of a city and metro area like Portland can begin to appreciate why a great indie music scene in the city's bohemian districts owes in part to the pristine farmlands and scenic wild areas just outside the metro area, and why the often-beleaguered immigrant populations and people of color tend to miss out on not just one or two, but often all or most, of the iconic experiences and public assets that have put Portland on the international map. If you're struggling to make a living after falling out of a strapped education system, chances are you're not enjoying those dandy bike lanes, trendy organic restaurants, and elegant literary events in the Arlene Schnitzer Auditorium.

Not to dwell on the negative. To summarize, this report finds that the Portland metropolitan area is, in most respects, a fascinating success and a testament to the benefits of conscientious urban planning and a commitment to the public good. An abundance of natural endowments combined with the ongoing implementation of pivotal public decisions of decades past has cultivated a series of self-reinforcing positive cycles that have created the city that Portlanders enjoy today: a fresh, creative urban hub whose residents cannot seem to stop enthusing about how much they love living there. By and large, Portland has lived up to the challenge posed by Lewis Mumford nearly eighty years ago; Portlanders generally have been worthy of the natural bounty they inherited. And they have, for the most part, demonstrated, in Mumford's words, "the intelligence, imagination, and cooperation... to make the best use of these opportunities."

Often, the difficulties in some endowment areas have silver linings. Take, for example, that pesky problem of low per capita incomes and the related problem of a small corporate base. Lower incomes also foster lower costs of living, helping make Portland feasible for bohemian artists and musicians who wait tables or make lattes to pay the rent. The relative absence of Fortune 500 corporations and chain stores leaves space for those who give and take in the city's intriguing artisan economy. True, being less than high powered has implications for tax revenues and the ability to fundraise for arts organizations, universities, and social service nonprofits. But often, Portlanders' talents and resourcefulness make up some or most of the difference.

A similar point could be made about the apparent weakness of conventional religion in greater Portland. Statistics make plain that the metro area has unusually large numbers of people uninterested in religion, a situation that leaves churches and other religious institutions with fewer real and potential participants. Yet partly as a result of the area's religious skepticism, many of the evangelical churches—the institutions most dramatically at odds with Portland's secular ways—have distinguished themselves with their unified service-oriented public outreach and penchant for innovation, and they have given a good account of themselves in what might appear the unlikeliest of places.

One clear exception to this "silver lining" phenomenon is "The True," the realm of knowledge, a conspicuous area of underperformance where one would be hard pressed to identify an upside. But signs of progress are emerging in this area.

Intriguingly, perhaps the most serious problem area in this mostly thriving metro area is one that is not fully captured in any one endowment area, but that runs as a line through all of them. That would be the lack of equity, the incomplete implementation of the Portland dream, the dynamic by which too many people of color are left on the outside looking in. Signs are abundant, though, that the city is waking up to the "nightmare" aspect of life in America's whitest large metro area; hope and encouragement can be gleaned from the swelling up of a consensus that this problem is real, unacceptable, and incompatible with Portland's vision of itself as a progressive community.

In thinking about the Portland area's problems, one can draw optimism, too, from the city's history of determined and conscientious striving toward reform. As explored on the foregoing pages, Portland has risen to the occasion and addressed numerous problems and challenges over its many decades: a once-fading downtown, threats to the prized agricultural and natural lands surrounding the metro area, a moribund, outdated economic base, and so on. As if haunted by Mumford's challenge—Are you good enough?—Portlanders and Oregonians seem unable or unwilling to wash their hands

of public injustices and deficiencies and accept their inevitability. By public and private means, sometimes through careful planning and sometimes by creative individuals' inspired do-it-yourself improvisation, the community seems intent on always making things better. It often succeeds. The broad survey undertaken on the foregoing pages leaves one curious about many phenomena. Among the areas ripe for future study is the possible relationship between the relatively small size of the metro area's minority populations (less small by the day, of course) and the glaring lack of equity. Has it been easier for Portland to ignore race concerns because people of color lack the critical mass and sheer visibility they have in many other cities? Another promising area for inquiry is the city's advanced secularism. What opportunities as well as challenges does this pose for conventional churches and religious institutions? How well can secular assets fill in as providers of the community resources traditionally provided by churches, parachurch ministries, synagogues, and other faith organizations?

Finally, Portland presents an enticing opportunity for deeper study of the concept of "livability." Portland's medium size has probably made it easier to achieve what Portlanders now enjoy: a city where the cost of living is generally manageable and it is relatively easy for most people to get from place to place and gain access to the resources that make the city livable. What will happen in the coming decades as more people, and wealth, are drawn to the Rose City, and Portland becomes more of a big city? "With a population growing both in raw numbers and diversity," Heike Mayer and John Provo write, "the Portland region's future will be more complicated... than it was in the past."¹²⁸ Will the city remain affordable and viable for those who give Portland its distinctive vibe and creative edge? To reference the often-seen signs and bumper stickers, will its denizens and decision makers be able to "keep Portland weird"? As Carl Abbott writes, "The 'civic moment' is fragile. The community consensus in Portland is continually under challenge."¹²⁹

The future will likely call to question a puzzle, or paradox, that already exists in Portland, one having to do with the tension between, on one hand, many Portlanders' conception of themselves as different and somehow above prosaic concerns like impressive jobs and per-capita income, and, on the other hand, the reality that a certain level of conventional business and economic success is needed to finance the whole enterprise. People, to put it simply, need to obtain some kind of income if they are going to live in Portland, and the community needs that to happen if it is going to be able to fund public resources. As attested by people who are forced to leave the area for want of satisfactory employment, "in order to take advantage of [Portland's] justly famous high-quality, sustainable lifestyle, you first need a job," urban affairs writer Aaron Renn notes. "It's not livable if you can't live there."¹³⁰

Renn wrote that in 2010, when the recession was having an outsized impact on the city's job market. The passage of a half decade has brightened the picture considerably. Yet there is a truth in his observation that greater Portland would do well to remember lest it become too enamored of the "Portlandia" image of itself, succumb to complacency, and neglect what might be termed the fundamentals of a successful, sustainable, and just city: jobs, tax revenues, high-performing schools, equal opportunity, and the like.

For, indeed, no city is livable if one cannot live there—and no city can count itself as thriving if a significant share of the people cannot thrive there.

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IV. APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In defining the research scope and priorities, as in drafting the profile and seeking out sources of data and insight, I was very much guided by the rigorous and specific methodology of the project designers at the Thriving Cities Project. Left to my own devices and instincts, I likely would not have crafted such a comprehensive profile, and I would have probably structured it differently. I say this by way of extending a compliment to the project designers. Invariably, the seemingly less interesting pathways I was “forced” to navigate were fruitful, leading to insights I might not have seen, and to connections between different forces and phenomena I might not have made.

Herein lies the magic of the six endowment areas in relationship to one another: Their comprehensiveness led me, the writer, to explore and account for factors that I, as a typical mountain-loving, eco-conscious liberal Portlander, might be tempted to dismiss (the “prosaic” concerns of the business community, for instance). By the same token, it seems likely that readers of this profile will have a similar experience. I hope that the holistic structure gives business-oriented readers more of an appreciation for the real community contributions—artistic, economic, and otherwise—of the liberal arts grads, artisans, and less-than-high-powered creatives who give Portland its distinctive aesthetic. Similarly, I hope reading this profile might encourage some of those “Portlandia” types to appreciate the necessity and value of corporations, economic growth, and other concerns of more conventional business interests. Indeed, I sense that these two “camps” tend to dismiss one another and fail to appreciate what the other contributes to the community’s well-being.

To prepare this Portland profile, I collected, read, and analyzed a large volume of data sources, books, and articles. In some instances, these were “open” readings in which I combed through potentially germane materials and collected the pieces of information—and insight emerged. In other cases, I tracked down data points specifically called for by the Thriving Cities Project methodology and input from the editors. As is always the case with writers, I ultimately used instinct and the need for a comprehensible narrative to guide my myriad decisions about how to fit the seemingly infinite pieces into the puzzle. Apologies are offered to readers who feel that something important was left out or underemphasized.

Interviews were conducted, formally and informally, with two dozen or so experts, leaders, residents, and activists. The quotes from many of those interview subjects appear on the foregoing pages. Other interviewees are not directly quoted, but their perspectives influenced the writing. In choosing interview subjects, I employed a process similar to that used with published sources: I was guided by a combination of need, subjects’ availability and willingness, and my own instinct and curiosity. As often happens when one spends months engaged in an absorbing research and writing project of this magnitude, I also found myself constantly soliciting and receiving the observations and insights of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances in everyday conversations. My questions to the interviewees were oriented toward the title of the research project of which this profile is part: In what ways is Portland thriving, and not? What were and are the keys to Portland being the distinctive and attractive city it is? Who is left out of the Portland dream, and why? The question I put to Ben Sand of the Portland Leadership Foundation was spur of the moment and fortuitous: If the Portland of the future falls on hard times, what will have been the reasons? I won’t forget Mr. Sand’s answer: selfishness. I know that readers join me in hoping that does not come to pass.

APPENDIX II: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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