

OREGON PLANNERS' JOURNAL

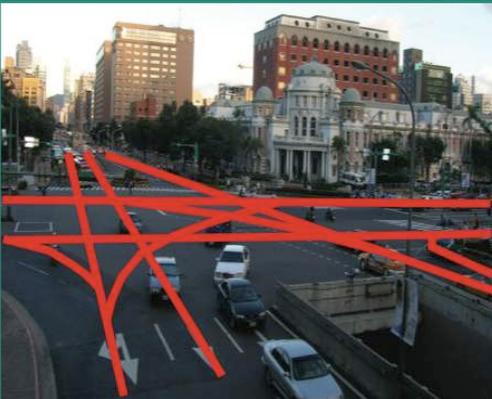
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Making Great Communities Happen

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The Sustainable City Year Program at the University of Oregon

500 students dedicate 80,000 hours of coursework to study planning and urban design issues in the City of Salem as part of the Sustainable City Year Program through the University of Oregon. [> Go to Story](#)

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History, Humility, and Prudence

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North Downtown Waterfront Development

BY ELIZABETH M. SCHMIDT, ARCHITECTURE AND NICO LARCO, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURE, UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

As part of the year-long Sustainable City Year partnership between the University of Oregon and the City of Salem, five groups of three students in an architecture studio course worked with the City of Salem to develop five schemes for the redevelopment of the North Downtown Waterfront. The subject area is located north of Union Street, south of Mill Creek, east of the Willamette River, and west of High Street.

This North Downtown Waterfront site contains industrial buildings, car lots, and other stand-alone businesses that do not make full use of the value and possibility of the area. Currently the riverfront is zoned for high-density residential, but progress in that direction has been minimal. The City of Salem is in a unique position to help move the neighborhood in a new direction.

The students in the North Downtown Waterfront Development studio set out to generate big ideas and an overall vision for what the neighborhood could be. During the fall 2010 academic term at the University of Oregon, students in the architecture studio course worked with students in a planning, public policy, and management course, particularly during the beginning context investigations.

This article is a summary of the students' work and recommendations. The students investigated existing site conditions and a variety of factors influencing development of this part of Salem. These investigations led the students to focus on some key issues that would be addressed by the broad range of the groups' design schemes, including:

- The Commercial Street barrier, currently blocking access to the Willamette River, particularly for bicyclists and pedestrians
- A significantly underutilized Mill Creek



Site map showing the location of the North Downtown Waterfront site within downtown Salem.

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- The rail line on Front Street
- The potential for direct connections to other parts of Salem, via bike paths along waterways, Union Street for east/west connections, or Liberty Street for downtown accessibility

With these issues in mind, groups began to branch out into their own particular visions of what the area could become in the future. Each group took an individualized approach and worked toward a unique scheme, but all students stressed the importance of a few common elements:

- Including the special public places within the site
- Encouraging a more bicycle and pedestrian friendly environment
- Moving toward a more sustainable community, including green streets, bioswales, and ecological preservation of the creek and river habitat
- Creating a mixed-use district that would help to form a unique and inviting community for Salem residents and visitors

This article documents the students' investigations into current conditions and possible future scenarios.

Methodology

The design studio was divided into five groups of three students to work on urban design proposals for the North Downtown Waterfront area. The focus was to research and understand what the existing conditions are, what the community members would like to see in the area, and what the possibilities are for the future vision of the area. To accomplish these goals, students conducted a collaborative charrette with planning students, site visits, community engagement, and precedent research. In early October, nearly 60 students from the architecture and planning departments visited the site. Students listened as several city employees and community members shared their knowledge and vision for the site,

then the group toured the area on foot to get an in-depth feel for the place.

Design efforts were focused on the area between the Willamette River and Broadway Street on the west and east, and Mill Creek and Union Street on the north and south. All of the groups studied and considered how nearby downtown, parks, schools, and civic centers both affect the North Riverfront site and are affected by it. Students carefully examined current traffic conditions and investigated realistic possibilities for relieving congestion and improving access to the many amenities of the area.

Through site analysis, community input, cooperative charrettes, and a lot of creative thought, the five groups documented plans for the future of the North Downtown Waterfront. While the ideas for these plans were to consider physical and economic viability, the students were also encouraged to think big and look at the site with a 30-year time horizon in mind. With this long-term vision, students could understand and examine short-term needs and starting points, while not necessarily being tied to current conditions and previous design assumptions in the area.

Existing Conditions and Key Observations

Salem is the state capital of Oregon, and with a population of 157,000, it competes with Eugene for the second or third most populous city in Oregon. Salem is located in the heart of the Willamette Valley and straddles the Willamette River and the border of Marion and Polk Counties. The downtown core offers retail and other commercial amenities and is closely connected with vital historic neighborhoods, the campus-like Capitol Mall, and Willamette University. There is a vibrant agricultural community in the surrounding area.

Student groups made and recorded some key observations during the research and analysis phase and throughout the entire design process. The observations below gave students an understanding of the opportunities and constraints of the project and helped to shape the

goals of the final scenarios.

STUDENT SCENARIO ALTERNATIVES

The five Scenario Alternatives found on the following pages represent the work of five different teams of three students each. All five of these scenarios addressed sustainability on a multitude of scales. Broad ideas such as density, bike and pedestrian friendly environments, livability, and transportation significantly influenced the programming and layout ideas for the North Downtown Waterfront redevelopment site. Smaller-scale ideas such as public places to sit and gather, waterfront connections, and permeable paving can also be seen in many of the scenarios. With the energy and input from community members, planners, developers, professors, and architects, the students of the North Downtown Waterfront redevelopment

Scenario I site plan.

CREDIT: FIGURE PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON.



View of the "hinge" from Union Street.

CREDIT: FIGURE PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON.



studio produced five different approaches to how this site can be transformed into a vibrant, beautiful, and sustainability-minded community spot.

SCENARIO I: THE WAREHOUSE DISTRICT

This scenario seeks to create a mixed-use district that contains housing for varied economic classes; daily services; commercial real estate for local shops, local artisans, and local producers; entertainment opportunities along the river and Front Street; and natural spaces that support ecological awareness and appreciation. The overall feel of the place tries to respect the current and historic structures and uses of the neighborhood by reusing existing structures while maintaining a location in Salem for production of tangible goods.

Goals

One of the main goals in creating the Warehouse District is to create a hub of activity along the riverfront, paying particular attention to the intersection of Front and Union Streets, and the Union Street Railroad Bridge access point. The "hinge" located at this point will signify the entrance to the heart of the district, the main spot for entertainment and nightlife. The area along the river, and the buildings facing Front Street, will support local businesses, encouraging the production and provision of goods and services. Storefronts might include print shops, furniture studios, and artists' studios, with the inclusion of breweries, restaurants, bars, and stages for live performances, which will help to support a 24-hour district.

Scenario I also focuses on walkability and creating a pedestrian and bike friendly environment. Along with the major sites of commercial activity along the river and Union Street, the overall plan is one that tries to encourage a mixed-use neighborhood.

Design Recommendations

As part of this "hinge" area, the block of Division Street that lies between Front Street and the river will act as a pedestrian street and provide service access for the businesses in that area. The street

will be capable of supporting outdoor seating and gathering spots for the commercial businesses along it, and will terminate in a public viewing and gathering area in conjunction with the river path. The north portion of the riverfront zone offers enormous potential to include an indoor/outdoor market or an outdoor activity center, bringing awareness to local food production and riparian ecology. The outdoor activity center could provide equipment rentals, educational classes, and activities, and it could serve as a community center for the people who enjoy its services.

SCENARIO II: LIBERTY PLAZA

Scenario II focuses on sustainability, walkability, and public engagement through the connection of major public places via a waterfront boardwalk and Liberty Plaza, a new center for activity in the North Downtown Waterfront site.

Scenario II site plan.

CREDIT: FIGURE PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON.



View of Liberty Plaza from the south entry

CREDIT: FIGURE PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON.



Goals

Scenario II increases the visibility of, interaction with, and access to a sustainability-focused and ecologically friendly environment. Street character and design are driven by the desire to encourage multi-modal transportation while providing features that can improve the health of ecological amenities. The proposed Liberty Plaza would provide a new center for activity and directly connect to the current commercial hub in downtown Salem. The proposal seeks to provide multiple connections to a variety of city features via many modes of transportation: pedestrian, bicycle, automotive, bus, and light rail.

Design Recommendations

The Boardwalk

The boardwalk embodies the idea of a living laboratory. It is an interpretive trail taking visitors around the borders of the site, along the Willamette River, down Mill Creek to Liberty Street. It progresses through ecological areas into industrial areas and illustrates the idea of using ecology to improve the urban condition.

Development along the riverfront begins with a public facility such as a research institute or a university-based laboratory. The rest of the riverfront is high-density housing with retail and commercial activity permitted on the ground floor. The riverfront development would include buildings of three to four stories, with housing densities of 20 units per acre or more, and would maintain a minimum 50-foot setback from the river.

Liberty Plaza

Liberty Plaza is an extension of the commercial development located in downtown Salem. It is created by widening a portion of Liberty Street between Union Street and Mill Creek.

The space and landscape of Liberty Plaza seeks to represent the collision of industry and ecology. At Union Street, the landscape mimics the street trees of Salem on a grid, beginning with a European Beech that mirrors an existing one in the 1600 block of Liberty Street. This zone then blends into an “orchard” style planting group of

sedges, referencing the legacy of fruit orchards in Salem. The next zone is an oak savanna that blends across Division Street into the riparian zone. The riparian zone is represented with bioswales drawn along existing topographic lines.

The big changes to the current traffic flow focus on diverting traffic from the Front Street / Commercial Street interchange. To do this, High Street becomes a two-way street all the way through downtown. Front Street also becomes two-way through downtown, with the addition of two lanes (one each direction), and the rail line is moved to the west side of the street. Commercial Street becomes a two-way street between Marion and Center Streets. These changes, along with the addition of light rail, bike lanes, street trees, and pavement changes, will help to create a pedestrian friendly, multi-modal environment.

SCENARIO III: LIVING LIGHTLY ON THE WATERFRONT

Through the use of mixed-use buildings, Scenario III attempts to transform the waterfront into a lively, active area that encourages a multitude of activities, day and night. The design scheme provides a strong view axis toward the river, with a proposed new North Street that terminates at a fountain. This axis will help to create civic areas that are open to the public along the

waterfront and form a public “Town Square” at the intersection of Front and North Streets with ample space for seating, a public market, a performance space, and other public activities.

Goals

Scenario III seeks to create a safe area that encourages walking and biking without reducing or obstructing vehicle access. Housing on upper floors along the river will help to maintain a presence at night and to highlight the river within the neighborhood. Office spaces along the river will help to maintain a daytime presence and support local businesses. A new bike/pedestrian trail looping around the site will increase access independent of roadways and increase exposure to the creek.

The neighborhood will provide a variety of housing options, allowing for a mix of apartment and condominium sizes, and live-work units, to accommodate a wider demographic, encouraging people to move closer to downtown.

Scenario III also seeks to create a strong extension of the downtown area, using Liberty Street as a continuation of retail from the downtown area, connecting to the creek and turning toward Front Street.

Design Recommendations

In Scenario III, the riverfront zone is conceived as a mixed-use area. While housing and local businesses will make up a large part of the space, the inclusion of an interpretive center or museum, along with a clear connection from North Downtown to the river, will help to make the riverfront a destination for Salem visitors as well as Salem residents. The potential for a recreation center at the south end of the waterfront also creates a local draw and provides activity that ties into the existing park system.

A greenbelt system along the river and creek will help create a framework for pocket parks and bike/pedestrian trails, while linking into existing paths to create a larger network. This system provides an opportunity to improve the ecology of the waterfront and creek. The possibilities to improve the ecological habitat include the

Scenario III site plan.

CREDIT: FIGURE PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON.



reintroduction of native plant species and community education about ecological restoration and the importance of healthy ecosystems.

Pedestrian access and comfort is enhanced via street trees to slow traffic, and through crossing islands and improved crosswalks at large intersections. Generous planting strips and on-street parking with a network of on-street bike lanes and sharrows will help to create multiple buffers, improve pedestrian safety and walkability, and give bike commuters easy access to all parts of the city.

Parking is addressed on a neighborhood scale with the hope of reducing surface lots throughout. By encouraging internalized parking, accessible by a series of alleys, a strong street presence can be maintained. One public parking structure along with significant on-street parking will help meet parking demands of commercial uses. Residential developments are responsible for their own parking needs, but are prohibited from building surface lots on major streets.

process was a major influence in the decision to create a new town center. That document reports that the people of Salem are looking for the following amenities to be brought into their city:

- A new town square
- New downtown housing
- Additional restaurants
- Pedestrian-friendly streets
- Improved bike facilities
- More riverfront and creekside corridors

Scenario IV proposes the North Downtown site as an ideal location to incorporate all of these ideas. North Downtown is a highly underutilized space in a prime location. Creating public spaces such as parks and a town square is a high priority, as they provide an opportunity for the public to enjoy the Willamette River and Mill Creek and would be within easy walking and biking distance of downtown.

SCENARIO IV: NEW TOWN CENTER

In this scenario, Salem’s Vision 2020 planning

Scenario IV site plan.

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Detailed plan of Fir Street.

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Goals

Mixed demographic housing within the site is essential to provide for the diverse needs of the people of Salem as well as to create a vibrant neighborhood. Commercial uses, including, but not limited to, restaurants and shops would be carefully phased into the neighborhood to meet demand. A one-block “Main Street” commercial core embraced at either end by a town square and park would be the ideal spot for phase one development. An improved bike system would be a key element of Scenario IV to increase sustainable transportation and reduce traffic congestion. The North Downtown site is

centrally located in the city and has tremendous potential to support and encourage bike and pedestrian pathways.

Design Recommendations

In order to create a Town Center that has life and vitality, a core of activity would be created along an east/west axis between the Willamette River and Mill Creek, connecting the two waterways and serving as a central hub for the commercial and civic functions of the neighborhood. All other programmatic functions in the neighborhood connect back to this central area.

To help support the vitality of this neighborhood, a mix of housing types would be present. Part of the vibrancy of the neighborhood would be a restaurant culture not currently found in Salem. An all-hours restaurant district with morning, lunch, evening, and after-hours eating establishments would populate the area, with a focus on a “Town Center Axis” along the proposed new Fir Street, supported by the heavy pedestrian traffic and the visual and spatial proximity to the civic spaces at either end of the axis. A small performing arts venue is also envisioned.

Improving pedestrian walkability was a major part of this project. The plan to increase walkability incorporated the “greenbelt” transportation way, which would connect the site to the rest of Salem and downtown while providing pedestrian infrastructure throughout the site. Pedestrian-friendly crossings were added to Commercial and Front Streets, and bike lanes, on-street parking, and landscaping help to separate the sidewalks from the streets, allowing for a more comfortable, walkable neighborhood.

SCENARIO V: ARBOR LANE

Scenario V focuses on the ideas of connectivity, diversity, and sustainability. It supports a connection between the North Downtown Waterfront site, the heart of downtown, and the city as a whole. Scenario V encourages a diverse range of building uses, including a range of economic housing types. It also incorporates a variety of sustainable features, helping to

improve and highlight natural features, as well as supporting bike and pedestrian transportation.

Scenario V was driven by a desire to provide places that encourage interaction between people at all income levels. This brings culture and diversity to the area, opening it up for more possibilities.

Goals

One of the main goals in Scenario V is to enhance the connectivity across and through the entire site while providing clear and easily accessible paths to and from other parts of the city. The Willamette River and Mill Creek are major amenities for the site and are treated as such in this scenario. By enhancing visibility and accessibility to the waterways, Scenario V increases the connection to important ecological habitats and provides places for visitors to physically interact with the natural environment. Increasing the connection between individual visitors is also a goal of this particular proposal. Arbor Lane creates a community scale gathering space in the heart of the neighborhood, providing commercial fronts for local businesses, space for artistic displays, and a place for outdoor events.

Design Recommendations

A river walk along the Willamette River takes advantage of the riverbank, opening it up to the community and providing an extension of the pedestrian and bicycle loop. Commercial businesses, such as small local shops, restaurants, cafes, local food markets, and a bicycle repair shop, would be located along the river. A promenade with a river overlook supports large outdoor events, such as a Saturday market.

The proposed Arbor Lane is perpendicular to the promenade and is characterized by wide sidewalks, water features, and sculptures. Just off Arbor Lane is an intimate, covered alley allowing for shopping and strolling in all seasons.

A pedestrian and bike path along Mill Creek connects to the single family residences east of the site. This path was designed to bring the existing community together and provide an outdoor amenity for all. A sculptural walk is intended

to bring local artists and Salem manufacturing companies together. In the early phases, the walk would connect High Street to the Willamette River, but it could easily be extended farther east in the future.

Front Street's design is a celebration and

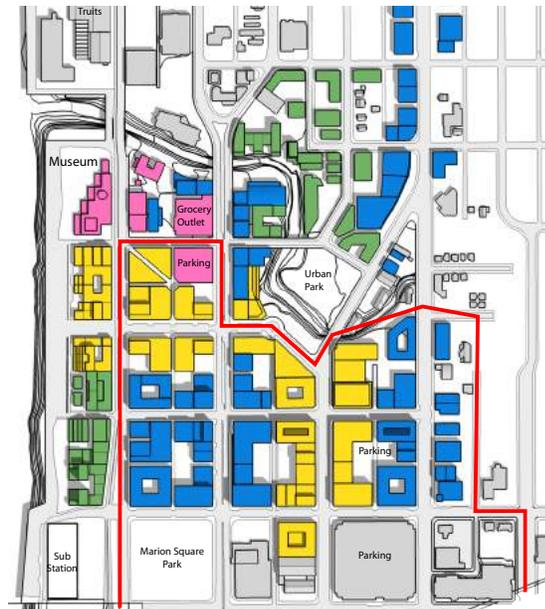


Scenario V site plan.

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Uses diagram.

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USES

- | | |
|--|---|
| Medium to High Density Residential | Other |
| Mixed Use (by building) | Off - Site Buildings |
| Cultural Mixed Use with ground floor retail | Extension of the Central business district |

integration of the train. The sidewalks are 15 feet wide, and trees provide a barrier between the train and pedestrian traffic. The wide sidewalks are meant to allow for bike traffic as well. A two-foot wide median provides a buffer between the train on the west side and automotive traffic. Locating the train on the west side of Front Street limits the train's disruption of automotive traffic. Parking is located on the interior of most blocks, helping to minimize negative interactions between pedestrians and vehicles, and opening the street facades to foot traffic.

Conclusions

The City of Salem currently has interest, energy, and involvement in the North Downtown Waterfront site. There are multiple opportunity sites within the area and an active community engaged in a process to create a clear and exciting vision for the neighborhood. The site is directly bordered by both the Willamette River and Mill Creek, both major ecological amenities. While high traffic volumes currently provide barriers to parts of the site, opportunities for commercial and natural visibility are high. The North Downtown Waterfront site is a prime location for the expansion of urban development, the highlighting of ecological habitat and sustainable strategies, and the creation of a unique Salem district.

This architecture studio's urban design project was followed by a second term, in which the same students chose a single block within one of the above urban design scenarios on which to design a building that fit within the scenario. The summary report for that course, along with all of the other Sustainable City Year courses, is available on the University of Oregon Sustainable Cities Initiative web site.