

Full view of city's urban renewal lacking

An exhibit skips the areas where Portland has stumbled in its efforts

Walking through the "Good Citizens Are the Riches of a City" exhibit at the American Institute of Architects, it is impossible not to have one wish: That this exhibit were better.

It's not the AIA's fault. Indeed, the show marks an important departure for AIA's gallery, going beyond its usual design award and "architect-as-artist" shows.

It's not the Portland Development Commission's fault, either. Considering that the AIA invited the PDC to do the exhibit, who could expect the city's urban-renewal agency to produce anything more than a commercial for itself?

Yet, urban renewal is serious business, and its full history needs to be told. Portland has used renewal arguably as well, if not better than any city in the country — particularly downtown. But we've also paid a price: Urban renewal has cut off some Portland citizens from becoming a part of "the riches of the city."

The AIA exhibit is worth seeing, if nothing else, for the pictures. The show was based on a research paper (accompanying the exhibit, but with all but the sunniest days edited out by the PDC publicity machine) and designed by a team led by architect and PDC staffer Amy Miller Dowell.

It places Portland's activities in their historical context, starting with the creation of the city's official urban-renewal agency, the PDC, in 1958 to build the South Auditorium District. But the main focus is downtown on such unquestioned successes as Tom McCall Waterfront Park and Pioneer Courthouse Square.

In short, it's a show of winners.

Dowell and her team detail only one real loser: the Jewish/Italian/Chinese neighborhood plowed under to build South Auditorium's high-rise housing and Lawrence

Halprin's world-renowned Lovejoy and Keller fountains. But the final spin is the millions of dollars in tax revenues added and the kudos received from *The New York Times*.

Unmentioned in the exhibit or its accompanying history is the real beginning of bulldoze-and-build urban renewal in Portland: Memorial Coliseum. The arena and its surrounding road system displaced much of lower Albina, once the chief business district for the city's African American community.

The closest Miller and her team get to this sorry chapter in the city's history is the Model Cities program of the 1970s. For that, PDC administered federal funds to renovate hundreds of North Portland homes and build a park to honor African American leader Dr. Orville Unthank. Unmentioned is what happened around that park just a few years before: the decimation of the lower Albina business district's remaining black-owned businesses by the urban-renewal area created for Emanuel Hospital.

On a certain level, South Auditorium and Emanuel Hospital were the bad ol' days of urban renewal when a bunch of white guys reshaped the city with little or no public process. In a more candid appraisal of the PDC's recent work, essayist Karen J. Gibson, in the forthcoming book "Portland Edge: Challenges and Successes in Growing Communities" (Island Press), documents how Mayor Vera Katz has tried to change the PDC's processes and culture. The mayor pushed the agency's work out to Lents, Gateway and Interstate while widening the public involvement process and appointing such African American leaders to the commission as Noell Webb and current chairman Matt Hennessee.

But as Gibson documents, how much change has really happened is debatable. Despite heroic efforts by PDC staffers to involve the public in formulating wider goals of affordable housing and job creation in the Lents and Interstate urban-renewal efforts, the agency largely hasn't followed through.



AARON JARRETT

Aaron Jarrett envisions a mix of art and habitat in a proposal at Orlo for the restoration of Ross Island.

The recent recession and a court decision limiting urban-renewal taxation didn't help. But Gibson argues the PDC's closed culture and failure to coordinate with other city agencies has undercut all the feel-good outreach.

In the Interstate renewal district, in particular, those failures have only aided a new model of the urban-renewal bulldozer — gentrification — now routing the small remaining African American population in North Portland.

To be sure, the PDC has used urban renewal to build one of the most successful downtowns in the country. Elsewhere, the PDC's small storefront improvement grants have leveraged small businesses in many neighborhoods. But for big projects outside of downtown, when decisions are complicated by race and class issues, the agency's performance is, at best mediocre, and very often, disastrous.

Small wonder that one of the few tunes sung in harmony by the quartet of candidates running for mayor and City Council is that the PDC's culture and practices must change.

Ross Island return

Another exhibit worth checking out is a show of proposals for the restoration of Ross Island organized by the environmental/art organization Orlo (2516 N.W. 29th Ave.; open 2-6 p.m. Saturdays, through Oct. 9).

It's easy to wish this, too, were a

stronger and more comprehensive look at the possibilities for the island, destined to be restored after being chewed away for more than 70 years by Ross Island Sand and Gravel. But Orlo gets major points for thinking about the restoration for what it is: a design project.

Just across the river channel, the city's South Waterfront Greenway master plan has shown one possible outcome for the river's restoration: science donning the costume of nostalgia.

The plan is to make two miles of riverfront look as it did before any people (much less shipyards and landfill) showed up. The artists and designers Orlo presents, by contrast, imagine that nature and culture can convene in truly inventive, unabashedly controversial ways.

Terry Bastion imagines a rookery inspired by Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty." Melody Owen wants humans and eagles to share the same observation tower.

But Julia Stoops poses a penetrating question with her vision for a trio of sculptures portraying burning cement trucks. Recalling how eco-activists torched the trucks of Ross Island Sand and Gravel in protest of the company's environmentally destructive and sometimes illegal practices, Stoops wants to pose the question, "Whose actions will seem more criminal in the long run?"



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