



Square Root

Why Pioneer Courthouse Square is the most important block in town.

BY TOBY VAN FLEET PHOTOS BY CAMERON BROWNE

"Everyone walks through here at least once a day."

She's a mother of three. She and her gaggle of friends—all in black—spend a lot of time hanging at Pioneer Courthouse Square, populating the benches at the top of the amphitheater-inspired steps on the Square's west side. In those few words, she captures the Square's ever-rotating human kaleidoscope and, whether she knows it or not, what makes this red-bricked block the most crucial and maybe most radical place Portland ever built.

Since it opened on April 6, 1984, "Portland's living room" has been the spot where every social sect converges. Downtown

office workers hunker over burritos or Philly cheesesteaks. Chatting girlfriends chase the sun by a gushing fountain. A perpetual Hacky Sack circle sucks in and spits out an assortment of young men. Laptops professionals type. Gray-haired Russians sit on newspapers and play chess. Punk-rock kids talk loudly about nothing. Homeless people use the facilities. High-heeled shoppers take corner-to-corner shortcuts past the occasional performance artist or sidewalk preacher. Some stop, some don't. With more than 300 events scheduled each year, from the Million Marijuana March to Mexican Independence Day, this is where Portlanders vie for attention.

It's hard to remember just how bold this everyday scene seemed 20 years ago. But consider this: The place the leader of the Portland Business Alliance now calls "possibly the single most important piece of real estate in downtown Portland" was once a parking lot.

In 1858, the plot opposite Portland's oldest federal building was home to the city's first public school. Then, the Portland

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

Hotel rose to host visiting presidents and reign for decades as the elegant center of social life. By 1944, though, the hotel's glamour faded. The Meier & Frank department store bought it, and knocked it down in favor of asphalt.

The idea for the Square first surfaced in the 1960s, and demanded a relentless, citywide political will to pull off. The actual design fell to a squad of architects, writers, artists and a historian, charged to create something no modern American city had ever built: a real, living town square. "It's a piazza. It's a plaza. It's a zócalo. It's not a park," says Doug Macy, the team's landscape architect. Macy says they envisioned a space that would "encourage the citizens of Portland to do their celebrating."

"The Square is the psychological anchor of the city," says Jennifer Polver, who runs the nonprofit that manages

the place. "It takes a village to keep it functioning." Friction is inevitable, and a whole local mythology surrounds the allegedly sketchy leanings of some habitués. In reality, the Square has neither a significantly higher nor lower occurrence of common urban ills like drug dealing, assault or "aggressive panhandling" than other parts of downtown. In fact, its open spaces and the presence of 10 million visitors a year may deter crime.

Whether they're celebrating, enjoying a sunny day or just riding mass transit, eventually all Portlanders spend some time on this island of contained chaos and harmonious coexistence. The daily lesson of Pioneer Courthouse Square is that city life can work. The bigger message is that sometimes something that seems too good to be true can still be true. **F**



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