

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Neighborhood Identity: Zoning and/or Master Plan?

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12/8/2008

Identity is a very important quality of emerging neighborhoods and it can be successfully achieved through different tools, such as zoning code and master planning. This thesis is trying to prove how both can help shape the identity and enhance the spatial characteristics of a city district by its premises, whether they are used combined or separated. The results shown are different, but successful on their purpose.

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Architectural Programming 549

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08 December 2008

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The CONWAY property in NW Portland is an area of great opportunity to expand and improve the NW district urban grid. This former industrial area could link NW Portland and the Pearl district in a successful way, add on and reinforce the activities and uses that are still required in the NW area. There are several variables that usually help to shape new neighborhoods and make them succeed. Two of them are zoning and master planning. However, how can both of them reinforce this district's identity?

First of all, it is necessary to be aware that the proposed master plan for the CONWAY property doesn't go hand by hand with the zoning regulations of the district. Height, density and some proposed uses exceed the EXd zoning requirements. This is not a mayor problem because master plans and/or zoning always can be modified. The important issue is that both of them, in the way that they are projected at the moment, result in very different spatial and architectural approaches if applied separately.

The CONWAY property is currently zoned EXd, which is very permissive in general, but still presents some restraints. EX stands for Central Employment and it provide regulations “about the limits of what is allowed” (Planning and Zoning: Employment and Industrial Zones, 2007), and, “d” stands for Design Overlay Zone, which “promotes the conservation, enhancement, and continued vitality of areas of the city with special scenic, architectural or cultural value” (Planning and Zoning: Design Overlay Zone, 2008). It could be said that this particular zoning is going to have a direct impact on the new identity of the CONWAY area for several reasons.

The zoning code could help to shape the main physical qualities of buildings and streetscape. With a maximum height of 65 ft, the CONWAY area could become a transition in height and density between the low buildings and town houses of the NW district and the high towers of the Pearl District. Moreover, a 100% building coverage of the site could reinforce the high-density quality of the site.

EXd zoning doesn't require any setback and there's a maximum of 10 ft setback from the sidewalk, a rule that would provide the neighborhood with certain block footprint homogeneity. Moreover, the need to have windows in the ground level would promote commercial activity and a pleasant walkway for pedestrians. “In the EX zone, all exterior walls on the ground level which are 20 feet or closer to a street lot line, sidewalks, plaza, or other public open space or right-of-way must have windows” (Planning and Zoning: Employment and Industrial Zones, 2007).

The zoning regulations don't require a minimum of green areas on the sites of the CONWAY area. Probably this zoning code is not promoting green spaces within the perimeter of

the lot, or green roofs, but is contributing to shape the characteristics of the neighborhood. It is not important if it's a positive or negative regulation, but it's a regulation that contributes to shape the character of the zone.

Almost every use is allowed in this area according to the zoning code. A mix of residential, retail, industrial, office space, educational, and medical facilities can be included. This factor helps to promote a district that could live and fulfill most of its day to day activities including working and studying without leaving the CONWAY blocks. Therefore, based on the zoning code, it may be possible to create a community that wouldn't need to travel everyday to work, shop, or get medical assistance. Of course this may sound like a utopia, but according to the zoning regulations it can be achieved.

Zoning codes can influence and compromise the appearance and land use in a neighborhood, and this statement can be easily graphically represented; however, the EXd zoning is applied in several neighborhoods in Portland with similar characteristics. Therefore, how much does it really reinforce its identity? The CONWAY blocks already have their identity. It is a formal industrial area eager to be revitalized. This could be done in several ways. Following the parameters of the current zoning plus what it is existing at the moment could create a unique identity to the neighborhood, but it could also result in a mimic of another revitalized formal industrial area. It's a risky matter and here's when the other important factor, even if it doesn't follow the EXd parameters should be analyzed: The Master Plan.

I am not stating that without a master plan the CONWAY area would become the twin

brother of The Pearl District (or any other formal industrial area in Portland) because they have different qualities like building age and style, location, block size, history, activities and, land uses. However, the current master plan for the CONWAY area proposes a very different and innovative solution.

It's true that zoning codes and overall planning can be combined to obtain great results, but the premises of the current plan are bold and ambitious. The proposed master plan includes water canals, green corridors with pedestrian and bike lanes, 15 to 25 story buildings and higher densities that the ones allowed by the EXd zoning. It also includes park blocks similar to the ones in downtown, a community center and a streetcar.

The new overall plan is trying to reduce traffic, promote biking, walking and public transportation; and lots of green areas and canals filled with storm water. In summary, it is trying to generate an autonomous and sustainable neighborhood for people to live, work and enjoy their spare time in. It doesn't feel like a connection between the NW district and The Pearl District. It seems more like the center between these two, which is not wrong. It's just a different approach.



Master Plan Conway District (Neighborhood Character)

The result of this master plan is very interesting because it doesn't try to reinforce the identity of the CONWAY area. It provides the area with a completely new and different identity; even different to most of Portland's existing neighborhoods. However, zoning and master plan don't have to be in a dispute. They can retro feed each other and take the more suitable characteristics, which combined could be able to form the identity of this new development.

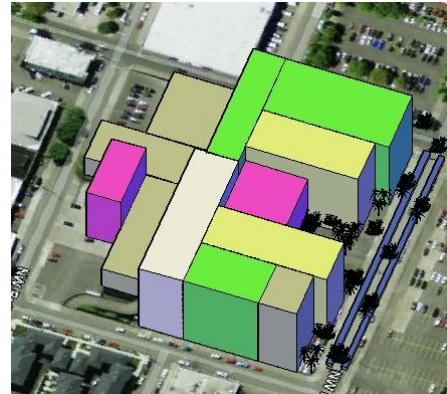


Master Plan Conway District (Raleigh Street)

For instance, a site of the Conway area can be tested with the current EXd zoning and the essence of the intrepid propose of John Spencer's master plan, and compared to another one just applying the zoning code. Both urban proposals would shape a different urban streetscape and help improving the existing zone. The site picked is the block on NW 20th St. between Raleigh and Pettygrove. This site was not picked randomly. According to the master plan Raleigh St. is going to become a canal, and leaving the master plan aside this block has an interesting structure with a ramp that could show how zoning by itself could help to enhance the identity of the area.



Aerial view with current EXd zone



Aerial view with current EXd + current Master Plan

The illustrations above represent two different solutions for the same plan. They both change the characteristics of the neighborhood in different ways, and both can be applied. However, it's not a fact that one of them would reflect and solve the community values and needs, or that the plan is going to be successful. They just try to show how zoning, and zoning + the implementation of a master plan can reinforce and modify the identity of an existing district.

In conclusion, the zoning code and the master plan would have an impact in the result of the new identity of the CONWAY area. As innovative as it is, the proposed master plan probably is going to be more influential on the final character of the neighborhood. However, CONWAY is an interesting industrial area, which based only in new development and infill according to the EXd zoning could also shape a very distinctive identity and spatial qualities.

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