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# HOUSE & HOME

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## House & Home | US West Coast

# The pedestrians' paradise

Careful planning has helped central Portland thrive as a residential area, says **Sarah Murray**

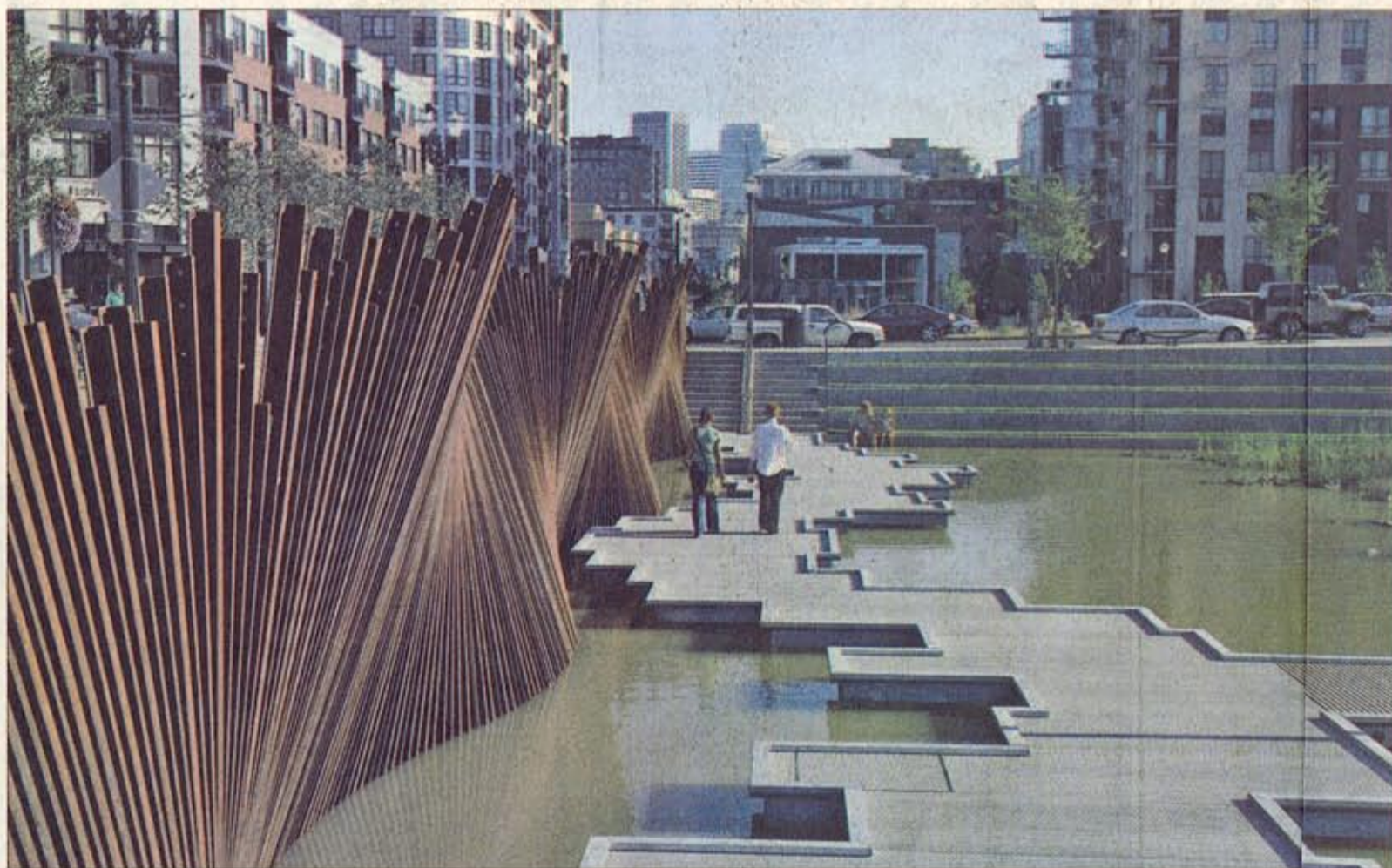
**L**ooming high above the broad streets of Portland's Pearl District on red brick walls are the faded remains of painted letters reading "Carton Services" and "Nautical Lead Co" while, at the occasional mechanic's workshop, men in overalls peer into car engines. These days, however, it is not the rattle of machinery that echoes through this former industrial district but the sound of corks popping and cappuccino machines hissing in the bars and cafés of what is one of the Pacific northwest's hottest property markets.

On North-West 13th Avenue an old warehouse site has been transformed into a temple to contemporary creativity, entered via the old loading dock. At Blue Hour the chef serves dishes such as rabbit loin wrapped in speck in a chic setting where tables covered in clean white cloths are flanked by a long bar that is the place to be seen. Next door Californian designer Babette displays her edgy designs in a cool minimalist space while, just across the street, the Bullseye Gallery showcases the work of contemporary glass artists.

The transformation happening here is being repeated throughout this area of the city as designers, artists, entrepreneurs and restaurateurs set up shop in the old factories and warehouses of this area of 100 or so blocks bordered to the north by the Willamette River. Unlike many former industrial areas, this one is within walking distance of much of the rest of Portland.

"The Pearl District is a very successful neighbourhood and the location is incredible, with close proximity to the river, the freeway, the coast and the mountains – and connectivity to downtown," says Francis Russo, director of Vertical Living Group, the company that is marketing 937, a high-end condominium development on North-West Glisan.

In fact, Portland is full of attractive residential areas. Overlooked by Mount Hood, it is a green, clean city that takes environmental stewardship seriously. The city's Office of Sustainable Development promotes everything from recycling to eco-friendly building standards. Moreover, with plenty of lush parks, European-style buildings and city blocks that are much shorter than the US norm, Portland is a pedestrian's par-



Eco-friendly: Portland is a green, clean city that takes environmental stewardship seriously

adise. Most of the city centre is accessible by foot or by a light rail system.

"The lifestyle here is amazing, particularly for those of us who have come from larger cities who want to have some arts and culture but want to leave behind a lot of the chaos," says Trisha Guido, a designer who left her job in the corporate world in San Francisco and moved to Portland five years ago. "It's an hour and half to the beach, I walk to work most days and I'm about three blocks from Forest Park, one of the largest urban parks outside Central Park in New York," she says.

Much of the appeal the city holds for Guido and others like her is a result of the foresight of local government authorities. While Portland is Oregon's largest metropolis, it remains untainted by the urban sprawl that has ruined so many other US cities. Since the 1960s its planners have waged war on the

uncontrolled spread of suburbia, drawing a circle round the city and restricting development beyond it.

"That, along with other visionary things, has created a situation that's pretty unique," says Greg Higgins, a celebrated chef and proponent of locally sourced organic food. "We're in close proximity to phenomenal farmland – and that's become a cultural aspect of Portland."

This rich agricultural land is what provides a living for the area's many organic farmers and enterprising vintners who, taking advantage of a climate that is reportedly identical to that of Burgundy, have raised Oregon pinot noirs to international prominence.

If food and design is part of Portland's culture, much of it is heading for the Pearl District. The transformation of this abandoned rail yard and factory area began in the 1980s, when artists

moved in to take advantage of low rents and large loft spaces. Investors followed, buying up buildings and renting them out to gallery owners or converting them into condominiums.

Today, restaurant launches and exhibition openings are the norm. "It's been quite the magnet for new boutiques and restaurants," says Sue Miller at Hoyt Street Properties, which is behind a 34-acre development at the north end of the neighbourhood. "The district went from a few hundred residents [in the late 1990s] to more than 6,000 – and that's a lot to add in nine years."

Her company's \$600m project – now halfway to completion – has proved a catalyst for much of the construction and renovation activity in the Pearl District. Sited on the former Burlington Northern rail yard, the project will include office and retail space, affordable housing and luxury condomini-

ums, ranging from 500 sq ft studios to multi-million dollar penthouses.

Another new condo development is the 937 building, designed by Holst Architecture and for which Guido's company, Relish Design, is one of the accessory interior design partners.

Along with housing, shops and services have opened to cater to the new residents, with a wholefoods market on North-West Couch Street and a supermarket soon to open on North-West Lovejoy. "It's amazing to watch how the Pearl District has changed," says Russo. "And the district is very robust now, with all the neighbourhood amenities."

Buyers include young executives and entrepreneurs priced out of other big northwestern cities and looking for a combination of urban culture and natural beauty. Locally, empty-nesters have downsized and moved from houses outside Portland into the city centre to be



nearer to shops, restaurants and galleries. And some incomers have homes elsewhere but want a pied-à-terre in which to stay for a few days while they soak up some culture and cuisine.

"People are coming from all over the country as Oregon has gained the notoriety of being a very livable place and also very ecologically progressive," says Miller. "We're getting people from as far away as the east coast and as close as San Francisco and Seattle."

At one point, interest in Pearl District real estate was such that vendors had to ration the opportunities to buy. Cocktail parties were held for condo sales, with queues for entry stretching round the block. "They would sell 30 per cent of their inventory on the first night," says Guido.

Since then the frenetic pace has slowed and inventory levels have increased from three to six months' worth of stock. "Things are on the market longer here as they are nationally, so it's not quite that crazy," says Guido. "But they are certainly selling."

Whether or not the Pearl District and the rest of Portland can weather the current downturn in the US real estate market is not yet clear. "There's a lot of product on the market," says Miller. "But, while there may be some hesitation by developers to move forward, we're not slowing down... I don't think the future has yet been served."

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