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September 2004

Life in the Pearl

A Portland neighborhood mixes urban sophistication with small-town charm

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By Jil Peters

Every morning Becky Porter hustles to catch the 7:34 streetcar to her job in downtown Portland. "I hate to miss it," she says. There is another streetcar seven minutes later, so why the rush? Because the 7:34, driven by Bob, is also taken by her friends Clair, Pam, Barry the Businessman, the Book Lady, Soccer Girl, and Name-badge Clerk — names fondly assigned by Clair. The group uses the morning commute to catch up. The riders on the 7:34 live in Portland's Pearl District, where small-town pleasures — like meeting people you know on your way to work — coexist with urban life.

During the last eight years, this compact community adjacent to downtown Portland has been transformed. What had been an industrial warehouse district for 80 years has become a vibrant place to shop, eat, work, and live. Some of the weighty brick buildings that give the Pearl its architectural identity have been creatively restored. New projects — with designs faithful to the



The Brewery Blocks development houses condominiums and Henry's 12th Street Tavern.



Photos by James Carrier

A streetcar carries residents downtown.

district's industrial roots — have erupted like popcorn. The result is one of the most dynamic and appealing neighborhoods in the nation: sophisticated yet approachable, cutting-edge yet down-home.

There is an incredible sense of community here," says Becky Porter, who moved to the Pearl with her partner, Shaun Sjostrom. "We moved from a suburb where we had lived for six years and knew almost nobody. Now we've lived in the Pearl for a year and a half, and we feel like we know everybody."



James Carrier

Pearl resident Becky Porter

"We watched the Bridgeport Condominiums — the building across the street — being built," says Sjostrom. "A woman moved in right across from us who would read her morning paper out on her balcony in a hot pink muumuu. 'Muumuu's out,' Becky and I would say to each other. Inevitably, we began running into her on the street." They introduced themselves, learned the woman's name (Sheri), and now know her well — but still call her Muumuu.

Living here is all about quality of life, explains Trisha Guido, a 30-something who worked in the high-tech field for 12 years. When she moved back to the United States from England three years ago, Guido chose the Pearl District after a careful analysis of U.S. cities known for livability. "I got to a point in my life where I had everything I thought I'd ever want," she says. "I made a great salary. I had a perfect apartment in the center of London. I had a fancy sports car. But I worked to oblivion, traveled for business all of the time, and occasionally saw my friends."



Now Guido lives and works in the Pearl. She opened her own business, Relish, a modern home-furnishings and personal-accessories store, just a 10-minute walk from her condo, "but it takes me 20 minutes because so many people say 'hello' along the way," she says.

Guido launched Relish in November 2001. A woman in her 60s came into the store soon after. She had been walking by in the evenings with her dog and had been watching the store's progress.

VITAL STATS

POPULATION:

Approximately 5,000

OLDEST BUILDING:

The Armory, built in 1881; soon to be home of Portland Center Stage theater company

SIZE:

Approximately 15 blocks long by 8 blocks wide

NUMBER OF DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS COMPLETED OR UNDERWAY SINCE 1994:

48 residential and commercial

AVERAGE HOME COST IN 2003:

\$271,750

FAMOUS RESIDENT:

Writer, director, and producer Gus Van Sant

NUMBER OF PLACES TO EAT OR DRINK:

28

NUMBER OF HOME-FURNISHINGS STORES:

36

MOST POPULAR FALL FLAVOR AT MIO GELATO:

Pear

Guido recalls, "She came in and said, 'My house really isn't contemporary, but I love your store, and you're a woman who has started her own business — and I'm so proud of people who can do that — so I'm thinking that I just have to have that purse right there.' The people here love small business — they're very supportive.

"I finally feel like I have a balance. I'm building my business, and I'm feeding my life. I could go out every single night here if I wanted. There is always something going on — art openings, plays, dance."

And if Guido wants to escape to the outdoors, the Pearl offers easy outlets for that too. It's a 20-minute walk down Thurman Street to the lower Macleay Trail in Forest Park, the largest wooded city park in the country. Another 20 minutes of hiking connects you to the Wildwood Trail, which continues into Washington Park's Japanese Garden and the Hoyt Arboretum. "It's amazing. I've gone up there and disappeared for hours," Guido says.

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Learning to live small

Moving to the Pearl often means accepting less space. We asked Pearl District residents Jeff Alden (whose condo is shown at right), Clair Callaway, Becky Porter, and Shaun Sjostrom for their best tips on living small.



James Carrier

Don't cram. "The fastest way for a small place to look even smaller is to fill it to capacity," Callaway says.

Take advantage of storage professionals. "Our best investment was the custom closets we had installed before we unpacked. We're able to use our storage to the max," says Sjostrom.

Avoid overusing rugs. "Rugs define spaces and create warmth, but they also close down a room," Alden explains. He suggests balancing warmth and openness.

Hide stuff that you are not using. A wall unit in Porter and Sjostrom's condo attractively conceals a Murphy bed and a 6-foot work surface.

Have a one-piece-in, one-piece-out rule. "Anytime we buy something new," Porter says, "something else has to go, so we buy only stuff that we really love."

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The Pearl District is bounded by the Willamette River on the northeast and by N.W. Broadway Ave., W. Burnside St., and N.W. 16th Ave. on the east, south, and west, respectively.

SHOPPING

In Good Taste. Gourmet cookware, cookbooks, and fine foods. Evening and weekend cooking classes; call for details. *231 N.W. 11th Ave.; 503/248-2015.*

Oblation Papers & Press. Fine paper and stationery boutique with antique-letterpress print shop. *516 N.W. 12th Ave.; 503/223-1093.*

Odessa. Stylish clothing boutique. *718 N.W. 11th; 503/223-1998.*

Relish. Modern home furnishings and personal accessories. *433 N. W. 10th Ave.; 503/227-3779.*

DINING AND DRINKING

Bluehour. Mediterranean cuisine served in either an elegant modern dining room or a casual



Relish



Trisha Guido at Relish

cafe and bar. \$\$\$\$; *lunch Mon–Fri, dinner Mon–Sat. 250 N. W. 13th Ave.; 503/226-3394.*

Henry's 12th Street Tavern. Seafood, steaks, and 100 beers on tap in the restored Blitz-Weinhard Brewery. \$\$; *lunch and dinner daily. 10 N.W. 12th; 503/227-5320.*

Mio Gelato. Artisan gelato made on-site in flavors from pistachio to chocolate hazelnut. 25 N.W. 11th; 503/226-8002.

Park Kitchen. Upscale neighborhood tavern. Menu changes weekly to reflect fresh local ingredients. \$\$\$; *lunch Tue–Fri, dinner Tue–Sat, brunch Sat–Sun. 422 N.W. Eighth Ave.; 503/223-7275.*

Pho Van Vietnamese Bistro. Friendly yet elegant Vietnamese eatery. \$\$; *lunch and dinner Mon–Sat. 1012 N.W. Glisan St.; 503/248-2172.*

The Whole Bowl. Street vendor; sells healthy food to go. \$; *lunch Tue–Fri. N.W. Glisan between 11th and 12th.*

PLACES TO REST

Aequis Spa. Facials, massage, and body treatments all based on ayurveda — a 5,000-year-old healing science. 1306 N.W. Hoyt St., Ste. 201; www.aequisspa.com or 503/223-7847.



Photos by James Carrier

Umpqua Bank



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There are, of course, smaller parks within the Pearl that work for quicker getaways. The newest, Jamison Square, has a recirculating fountain, a favorite for kids and dogs. "If you come down on a sunny day," says David August, president of the Pearl District Neighborhood Association, "you'll see parents bringing their children to the park and meeting their spouses, who work in the Pearl, for lunch."

"The park is our backyard," says Elizabeth Van. "And we don't have to take care of it," adds her husband, Lam. Elizabeth and Lam own Pho Van, a popular Vietnamese bistro in the Pearl District, and are raising their two children — Luke, 6, and Lydia, 4 — here.

"It is a great place for kids," Elizabeth says. "Everything is within walking distance. If I need milk, I just walk a few blocks — with my environmentally conscious canvas bag, of course."

Lam and Elizabeth moved from southeast Portland to the Pearl six years ago. Like many others, they began coming here because of First Thursdays: The first Thursday evening of each month, art galleries open their doors from around 6 to 9 p.m. The free event draws huge crowds. "You never know what to expect," Sjostrom says. "We were at one First Thursday where people came down the street on stilts and in costumes. We used to go around to every gallery, but now we'll get a drink and just sit in front of the galleries and people-watch."



Kids in the swim at Jamison Square



Photos by James Carrier

The Pearl's manageable scale invites strolling

"Everyone gets involved," says Porter's friend Clair Callaway. "Even the real estate company and the bank stay open longer."

In fact, a neighborhood bank — the Pearl District branch of Umpqua Bank — is a good example of what makes the area special. With interiors by Pearl-based and internationally known Ziba Design, Umpqua looks more like a hip retail store than a bank. It's a hub of activity for those who live in the Pearl: Residents are encouraged to come in and relax in its living room–like lobby. The bank even brews its own blend of coffee and collaborates with two local knitting stores to host a well-attended monthly knitting group. The success of such an enterprise is a good reflection of the district's rise as a design center: Architects, interior designers, and advertising agencies have all found the Pearl an inspiring place to set up shop.



Elizabeth and Lam Van



Photos by James Carrier
Clay-pot cuisine at Pho Van

The Pearl District didn't just happen. Of all Western cities, Portland probably has the strongest reputation for thoughtful planning. The Pearl is one result — the product, says Portland historian and urban studies professor Chet Orloff, of a downtown plan that in the 1970s mandated the creation of a livable, accessible core.

"Everybody bought into the common vision that this really could be and should be a very vibrant and exciting neighborhood," says Homer Williams of Williams & Dame Developers, one of five major private developers of the Pearl District. To transform the area from an underused warehouse district, the city provided infrastructure — notably the streetcar line and parks. "We could build higher densities because we had the infrastructure to deal with it," explains Williams. In addition, he says, competition with each other pushed developers to create buildings that are architecturally much more interesting than the norm in most Western cities. "Because of that, this neighborhood will stand the test of time."

One force behind the Pearl's success is the Portland Design Commission, which oversees a set of guidelines intended to give the area a consistent architectural identity. "Walk through the Pearl," says Orloff, "and you will see a variety of buildings, but you will also get a sense of context. To some extent, the buildings work together. They have a cohesive personality."

Now the Pearl faces the pressures of success. Home prices are one issue. To new arrivals coming from inflated Western housing markets like California's, the Pearl District still seems reasonable. But to longtime Portlanders, housing costs are worrisomely high.

The city is trying to help out, working to ensure that the Pearl contains an adequate percentage of affordable housing units for seniors and other moderate- and low-income renters. And there are far worse things for an urban neighborhood to face than being too popular. One recently completed condominium complex, the Henry, sold out nine months before its completion and has 70 names on its waiting list. The high-end building is a model of environmentally aware architecture, with, among other features, a heat-recovery system that uses warmth from the vents of ovens and dryers to heat water for the building.

Beyond that, the Henry is a testimony to the Pearl District's vitality. Vinh Wong was one of the lucky ones who secured his condo in the building early on. He moved to the Pearl District six years ago, and at that time, he recalls, many of the district's improvements weren't finished. But, he says, "I could see the vision of a self-sufficient neighborhood. Everything a person needs is here — art, entertainment, and great restaurants to go to for lunch, dinner, or a drink. I don't think I could move anywhere other than here. This is home. This is 21st-century living."

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