

Opinion: Urban intervention is the path to saving Portland's character



Martha Terrell Community Service Center

Architect Chris DiLoreto asks whether demolition is always the right option in a city trying to establish historical footing.

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Great U.S. cities — New York, Chicago, Charleston, San Francisco — have a particular charm partly due to their preserved historically rich and varied architecture.

Sure, they've removed a lot of their past but what's retained helps make these cities memorable.

Portland, young by world standards, is now changing so rapidly we could be at risk of erasing much of the built environment that makes this our city so unique. The assault on our historic built environment comes from so many directions — financial constraints, local code restrictions, user changes — that it is truly amazing when an existing structure is retained.

There is an alternative to wholesale demolition and it's called Urban Intervention. More than pure restoration or adaptive reuse, it is the weaving together of old and new to make a better coherent development.

By reputation, one of the world's very best architects, and probably the only one that repeatedly utilizes urban intervention, is [Renzo Piano](#). He says architecture is often made of "...objects steeped in local history, laden with emotion and memories." Keeping those objects connects us

to our roots, is better for the planet (you're building less), creates increased density that's more likely to fit in, provides street facades that are familiar, improves access and pathways, makes more interesting architecture and often can be less expensive.

One of our more challenging tasks as architects is helping clients increase the use of their existing urban sites. Many have a building, or buildings, that occupy valuable real estate that owners often assume must be removed. In our firm's design approach, we go through an investigative multi-step process that defines the requirements for both the program and finances.

We then generate a series of design solutions that slowly peel away layers of the existing structure considering total restoration to total demolition; and finally, test those options against market conditions. The goal is to help owners make informed decisions that are best for them, their neighbors and Portland.

Consider the following three challenges:

1. When tasked with determining what to do with a large site in Portland occupied by an historic, early 20th Century mansion, the owner wanted it demolished. Its location in the center of the property seemed to make future development difficult. In the end we showed that retaining the mansion worked better than wholesale demolition. It became the site anchor and focus around which could be placed a ring of housing and commercial space. This led to a rich layering of exterior spaces with views of the mansion and keeps the existing tenant, providing a steady stream of income throughout the process.
2. Our project for a local community service center was based on adding value in a minimal way. We saved most of the old and added just enough to solve spatial and accessibility requirements. A collection of three existing structures, one historic, were separated by parking and varying floor elevations. We removed part of one building to allow for a new, below grade structure, that connects the lower floors while its roof becomes the access to the upper levels solving the connectivity issues.
3. The final example involves adding housing on a site with a mid-century office building. Removing the existing structure might be easier but then we'd lose the existing building's charm and tenant income. In a wide-ranging study, we tried putting housing over, beside and around the building. In the end, our solution led to siting a simple five-story structure in front of the building (between it and the street), raised over the existing parking. Now the new and old create a wonderful pedestrian walk between structures, provide housing and offices filled with natural light, retain the parking and helped reinforce the street facade.

Not every building should be saved, nor is urban intervention right for every site. Yet our experience suggests that taking the extra time to test the idea can often lead to solutions that make the whole design better than the original. It is exciting to see that some others are embracing the idea. Plans for the former Pepsico site in Northeast Portland come to mind. But we can do more.

As Piano says, "In urban interventions modernization must not undermine the character of the city. The context is a resource; it is material to draw on; a score to be interpreted." Could Portland have a better built environment if the design and development community pushed for more intervention and less demolition?