

Historic Courtyard Housing in Portland, Oregon: Characteristics

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The original research for this study was generously supported by a Belluschi Faculty Fellowship and a Fletcher Farr Ayotte Faculty Fellowship.

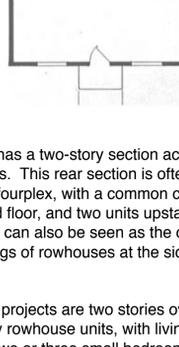
Courtyard housing from the streetcar era in Portland continues to be viable and affordable, providing good housing for small households. The unit designs are compact and simple, possible models for new housing for singles, couples and small families. However, it is in their relationship to the scale of the neighborhood, and in the creation of shared common space where we probably have the most to learn from them.

Portland's streetcar housing offers a clear example of how a building may share a classification with others of its type, but otherwise have little in common with examples in different cities. Just as Portland rowhouses bear little resemblance to eastern rowhouses, Portland's courtyard housing can be said to have a similar tenuous relationship to the more well-known courtyard housing of Los Angeles and other western cities. As with most of Portland's older multi-family housing, it straightforward and efficient, no-frills housing for working people.

Characteristics of the building type

These projects were mainly built from the 1920s to the 1940s. The earlier projects were usually wood-framed, with wood or stucco cladding. The later projects were more often built of brick. Increasing standardization of design can be seen in the later projects, with an almost identical building sometimes showing up on different sites across the city.

The buildings are most commonly one story in height, with small one-bedroom dwelling units similar to Portland rowhouses. They are around 500 to 600 square feet, with living and sometimes bedrooms facing the court, while kitchens, baths and bedrooms face the rear.



A common variation on this type has a two-story section across the back and one-story side wings. This rear section is often organized in a manner similar to a fourplex, with a common central entrance, two units on the ground floor, and two units upstairs; this subtype of courtyard housing can also be seen as the combination of a wide fourplex with wings of rowhouses at the sides.

Fewer than 20% of the courtyard projects are two stories overall. These buildings contain two-story rowhouse units, with living spaces on the ground floor, and two or three small bedrooms above. At around 1200 square feet, these family-sized units are similar to small suburban rowhouses being built today.

None of these buildings are large. They usually have eight to twelve units on a lot that is approximately a quarter-acre. The buildings tend to be on standard Portland lots – either a single 100' by 100' corner lot, or on two 50' lots in the middle of a block - larger parcels were seldom assembled from smaller lots. This respect for the lot pattern helps them to fit into their neighborhoods, which are predominantly of single family houses on 50' lots.

Midblock and corner sites

Courtyard housing in Portland can be seen as a further development towards higher density and more efficient use of typical building lots in residential neighborhoods. The earliest of the six widespread types - the fourplex - was a way to increase the density of the typical midblock 50' by 100' lots from one unit to four, with a net density of 32 units per acre. The usual rowhouse projects, of four attached units, were built on the 100' by 100' lots commonly found on the corners of the blocks. (There were no neighborhoods of rowhouses in Portland, with only one half-blockfront in the city - NW Irving between 17th and 18th - even approaching what would be considered a normal rowhouse configuration in an eastern city.) The rowhousing was a fairly inefficient use of the large corner sites, placing only four small one-bedroom units on a quarter acre; this rowhousing achieved only half the net density of the fourplexes, as it was most commonly one-story tall, versus the two-story configuration of the fourplexes.

Courtyard housing was a way to double or triple this density, while continuing to use the same dwelling unit type as in the rowhousing, a small one-bedroom flat entered from the outdoors. As can be seen here, the almost invariable pattern for Portland courtyard housing is the U-shaped building, (which more than doubles the usable building perimeter, and hence the number of units in the rowhouse configuration).

This approach makes the most sense for interior lots, where the limited street frontage was the determining factor in the number of rowhouses possible. Portland does have a number of these courtyard projects in the middle of long blocks. However, they account for fewer than a third of the courtyard projects surveyed. The rest of the projects are located on the typical larger, corner lots.

In these locations, the U-shaped building makes somewhat less sense. The street frontage is double that of a same-sized interior lot, and many more possibilities for site design and building configuration exist (such as an L-shaped building of rowhouses along the two streets). I believe that the site planning problems with Portland courtyard buildings stem from their conceptual basis; the courtyard projects were probably approached from the direction of increasing the density of rowhouse projects on corner lots, not from the direction of designing the best building configuration to work on a corner.

The most obvious problem with this building type on a corner lot is the confusion of back and front. The entry sequence is from one street into the courtyard and then to the units' front doors. The outside of the U-shape is then the back of the units, often with back doors from the kitchens (most commonly used for taking out the garbage). So here we can see the small effect of this - an almost 100 foot wall of back doors, with usual stoops and garbage cans. The entry sequence for visitors can be quite confusing, as the visible door right on the street is not the entry door, which can only be found by going around the corner, up some steps, and across the courtyard.

The accommodation of the automobile

The growing presence of automobiles begins to affect the design of courtyard projects. In midblock projects, the building is often raised above a basement level which can accommodate garages under the two side wings, with a large stairway to the court in the middle. Sometimes this is handled gracefully, sometimes meanly. In all cases, it creates an insoluble problem for accessibility.

Another common solution for garages occurs on corner lots. Portland's east side often has a gently hilly terrain, which allows for access from the two streets at slightly different levels - one side for pedestrians into the courtyard (still usually with a stairway), and the other side for garages off the street which tuck under one of the building's wings.

Sometimes this is handled very well. Sheffield Court has a fine entry off and courtyard off SE 30th Street. The garage doors are equally well-handled around the corner, alternating with curving stairs up to the kitchen doors. However, this early example from 1928 was not followed by future projects, probably due to the pressure to garage more cars; Sheffield Court accommodates three cars, whereas later examples squeeze in as many as ten.

Very few of these projects have common garages, or any type of vehicular circulation off the street. A good exception is Avon Manor, a two-story project in Irvington, which has a shared garage beneath the courtyard, accessed through a large archway.

The back door situation combined with the garage situation gives us the most inelegant of all streetscapes - a solid wall of garages topped by an elevated walkway to the backdoors. It is in cases like this where we can see how the indiscriminate reproduction of standard types without regard to specific site conditions can be destructive to the quality of the neighborhood.

Design of the site

One of the advantages of the U-shape (at least on the court entry side) is that rather than fronting the street with a 100 foot long solid wall, the narrow end walls of the wings face the street, with the court between them. This relates to the alternation of building and open yard typically found in a single family neighborhood, and allows these projects to not stick out in a neighborhood with varied housing types.

The courtyard entries are often beautifully designed and landscaped. While posing problems for accessibility, the stairways provide a clear transition from the street, marking a clear distinction between the public space of the sidewalk and the semi-public space of the court. Very few of these courtyards are gated, showing that even in our age of security concerns, clear spatial design can still often be sufficient.

The courts themselves exhibit a wide variety of size and quality. Some are narrow, minimal accessways. Others are beautiful, useful courtyards, where generations of tenants have clearly taken responsibility for the gardening.

If there is one common problem in these courts, it is that the clarity of the transition from street to court is not replicated in the transition from court to unit. The semi-private space in the court is usually limited to a small stoop and perhaps an entry roof. The consequence is that these spaces are seldom occupied - they are mainly circulation spaces through which residents proceed to their units, then shut their front doors. The windows from the living spaces also look out into his narrow court and directly at the units across, which means that most residents keep their blinds drawn. Much of this is due to the small dimension of the courts - most average around thirty feet across - but it is also obvious that considerations of privacy, both inside and out, were not paramount in the design process.

The lack of individual outdoor spaces and privacy problems are not handled any better at the rear of the units, which is often a narrow walkway to the back doors, with an building immediately across the lot line. This walkway passes right along the rear of the units, creating more privacy problems, which are somewhat mitigated by the floor levels being raised a few steps above the pathway.

This site plan illustrates another problem with the indiscriminate replication of a standard type without regard to site factors: the lack of response to solar orientation. The symmetrical U-shaped buildings are oriented in every direction, with no consideration of daylighting or shading for the units or the courtyard.

While the design of the court often discourages use by the residents, it also creates problems when it is used. The small dimension and lack of transition zones means that any activity in the courtyard impacts all the residents. This can be especially problematic when residents are at different life stages or have different lifestyles. At one building, a young couple moving out said the cause was their neighbors' young children, who would take over the courtyard playing loud games very early on Saturday mornings.

Conclusions

Portland's existing courtyard housing projects have both strengths and shortcomings. They continue to fill an important niche in Portland's housing market, but for our purposes the most important aspect is the lessons they provide for future housing development. Some of these buildings have been around for eighty years, and the test of time has made clear what works and what doesn't. These projects demonstrate that:

- It is possible to build efficient, affordable units at densities up to 50 units per acre without resorting to highrise construction or wiping out all open space.
- High density housing can be built at a scale which complements, rather than destroys, the neighborhood character.
- Buildings need to address the public space on both street frontages of corner lots, and not simply designate one street as the side.
- The issues of a clear back and front need to be understood.
- The automatic repetition of building types without regard to particular site conditions is detrimental to the streetscape and neighborhood.
- A reasonable number of cars can be accommodated onsite, (although these solutions as built are usually fairly primitive). However, an array of individual garages accessed from the street blights the streetscape and wipes out all on-street parking.
- Given the standard of a green / pedestrian court, showing lots without alleys render vehicular access to the rear very difficult. (Only one of the projects surveyed had a paved, woonerf-like shared court.)
- Accessibility issues need to be carefully studied on Portland's commonly hilly sites.
- A clearly defined common space for residents can be established as separate from the public space of the street, without resorting to walls and locked gates.
- Standard narrow lots - 50 to 100 feet wide - lead to small outdoor spaces and buildings pushed right up to property lines, which must be considered in the design.
- Adequate private outdoor spaces are difficult to accommodate at these densities.
- Issues of separation of units and privacy are paramount, and are exacerbated by differences in lifestyles between households.



1002-1020 SE 26th



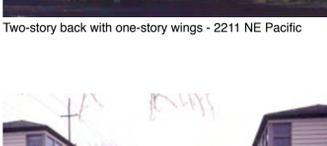
Sheffield Court - 1411 SE 30th



1920s wood and stucco one-story building - 703 NE 21st



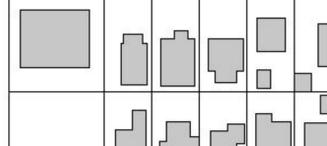
1940s brick one-story building - 1407 SE 27th



Two-story back with one-story wings - 2211 NE Pacific



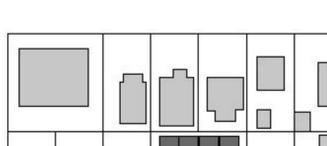
Two-story building with two-story units - 1818 NE 17th



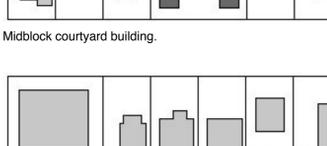
Typical corner rowhouse project.



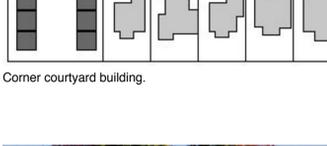
The standard U-shaped courtyard building - 2624 SE Main



Midblock courtyard building.



Corner courtyard building.



Backdoors on the street - 1302 SE 26th



Midblock building with garages beneath the wings - 130 SE 31st



Sheffield Court, entrance - 1411 SE 30th



Sheffield Court, side with garages



Avon Manor, showing arched entry to garage - 909 NE Brazee



A street side of a building dominated by garages and services - 1818 NE 17th



Narrow endwalls facing the street - 1504 SE Main



The Sorrento, entry to court - 2250 NE Flanders



Minimal courtyard space - 537 SE 15th



Laurelcrescent Court - 3087 SE Ankeny



Blocks around 2624 SE Main, showing the small distance between buildings, often used for service circulation



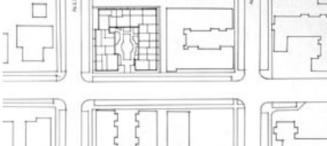
A typically-sized courtyard - 1021 NE Tillamook



The streetfront at 329 SE 20th



An unresolved back / front condition at 1324 SE 26th



A woonerf-like court at 2305 SE Ash.



The entry at 1212 NE Hancock



A pleasant but narrow court at 623 NE 21st