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MOBILE FOOD DISPLACEMENT AND FORMALIZATION: A CASE STUDY OF  
PORTLAND'S BLOCK 216

Marcello Ursic

Environmental Analysis Program  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
Pomona College

Thesis Readers:

Assistant Professor Guillermo Douglass-Jaimes

Professor George Gorse

Professor Marc Los Huertos

December 2023

**Abstract:**

Portland has been on the cutting edge of American mobile food for over fifteen years, becoming a critical darling in the popular and academic press for its role in trailblazing progressive mobile food policy buttressed by broad-based civic engagement. In recent years, Portland's mobile food landscape has begun shifting as downtown development has picked up post-recession, displacing some of the oldest and most prominent city center food cart pods with others likely to follow. Meanwhile, a new breed of formalized, purpose-built food cart pods has gained ascendancy. Called "food courtyards," their armored, insulated, and bourgeois character is distinct from traditional street-facing and class-heterogenous food cart pods. Displacement and formalization as depicted here demonstrate the extensive gentrification of Portland's mobile food landscape, which has serious implications for working-class Portlanders, homeless Portlanders, and food carts' enduring and highly publicized status as a culinary incubator accessible to marginalized groups. As a case study, this thesis documents the life and times of the late Alder Street food cart pod in the Portland downtown; its 2019 closure to make way for the 35-story mixed-use luxury tower Block 216; the difficult journey of a fraction of the ex-Alder carts to The Cart Blocks; the unwelcome implications of the Block 216 development project for Portland; and ultimately situates Block 216 and the Alder Pod as the largest, most dramatic, and most traumatic link in a long chain of mobile food displacement and formalization that barring significant interventions will persist.

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## Glossary

**TABLE 1:**

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Term</b>
BES	Bureau of Environmental Services
BMO	BMO Real Estate LLC
BRS	Bureau of Revenue Services
BPM	BPM Real Estate Group
CBD	Central Business District
CCP	City Center Parking
DDG	Downtown Development Group
EmZ	Empowerment Zone
EnZ	Enterprise Zone
ESD	Enhanced Service District

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FOTGL	Friends of the Green Loop
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MCHD	Multnomah County Health Department
MFI	Median Family Income
OMFA	Oregon Mobile Food Association
OZ	Opportunity Zone
PAR	Participatory Action Research
Parks	Portland Parks & Recreation
PBOT	Portland Bureau of Transportation
PC&S	Portland Clean & Safe
PDX	Portland
PHB	Portland Housing Bureau
PSU	Portland State University
SDC	Systems Development Charges

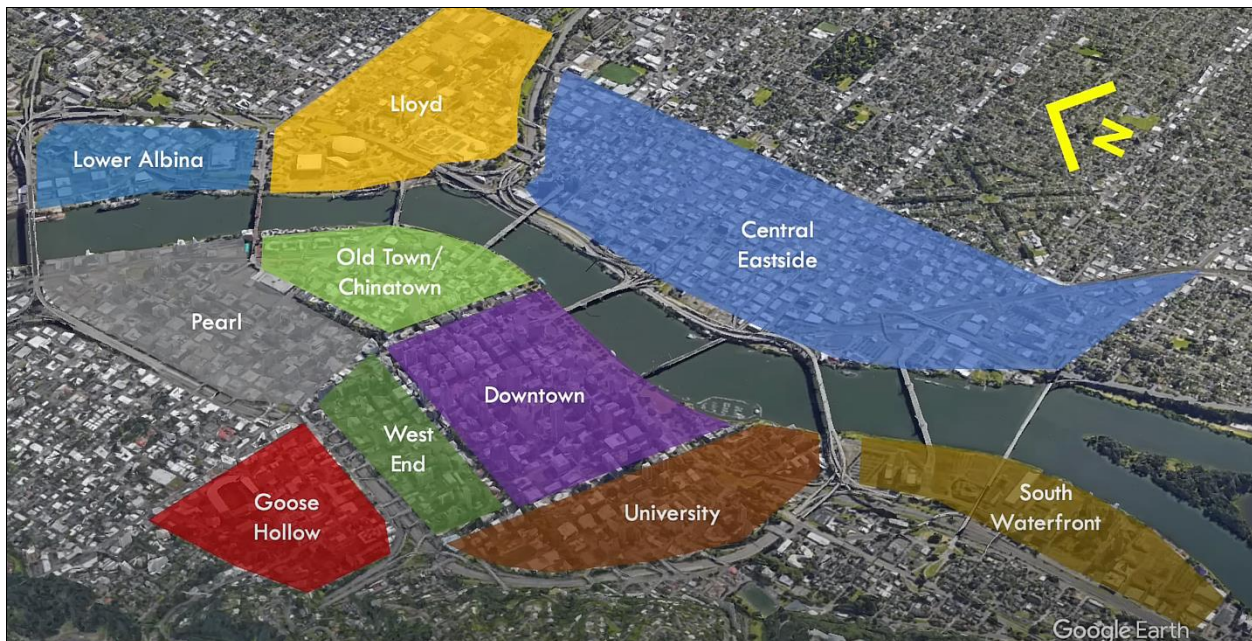


Figure 1: A rough reference map of central Portland's districts which may come in handy throughout (image credit: CityNerd).

<b>TABLE 2:</b>		
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Cuisine</b>	<b>Cart location when interviewed</b>
Omar	Syrian	The Cart Blocks
Aimee (and Juan)	Mexican	The Cart Blocks
Janice (and Danny)	Korean	The Cart Blocks
Henry (and Alice)	Chinese	Food hall in Portland Old Town
Liam	Japanese fusion	Near PSU Campus

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is one of the most difficult things I have ever accomplished, and I did not do it alone. Thank you to my three readers—George, Guillermo, and Marc. George: thank you for introducing me to Robert Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas*, enthusiastically supporting my first tentative forays into applying Mike Davis to Portland, and being an all-around cheerleader when I needed it. Guillermo: thank you for giving me bitter pills when I needed them most, pushing me to present my work at the American Association of Geographers annual meeting, and the copious literature recommendations that I admittedly usually did not make/have time for. Marc: thank you for helping me strengthen the urban economics portions of section two, introducing me to 'urban death spirals' during the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, and always being there with kind words and snacks on Wednesday nights. Thank you to my EA S&BE cohort-mate and dear friend Luba who called me smart and capable during times when I was feeling anything but. Thank you to the journalists, NGO leaders, and city officials who fielded my emails and allowed me to bounce questions and document requests off them so that I did not have to resort to the potentially expensive limbo of Portland's public record request system or read through too many dense, dry reams of city code. Thank you especially to Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop and Leah Tucker from Oregon Mobile Food Association for taking time out of their busy schedules to meet with me and patiently let me pick their brains about Portland's mobile food landscape and the Alder Pod story. Thank you to my parents who have financed me through college and whose judicious primary socialization, concerted cultivation, and professional-managerial class *habitus* have put me on track to live a

personally fulfilling and socially meaningful life. And finally, thanks most of all to the food cart restauranteurs who took the time to speak with me during July and August 2023. You are the ones who make Portland great. I am doing this for you.

## Introduction

Though I moved around a lot growing up, my family has had strong connections to Portland, Oregon for roughly a decade. Over that span, I saw one of Portland's most beloved food cart pods disappear and be replaced by a 35 story mixed-use luxury tower. This began in Summer 2019 and happened several blocks from my mother's apartment. To many Portlanders, myself included, this felt like a violation—not to mention the very direct and dire impact it had on the lives of hundreds of individuals and families whose livelihood were found there at the Alder Pod. For this reason, my thesis began as a project to figure out exactly what happened to the Alder Pod and why.

I began my data collection process over summer 2023, which meant a round of IRB approval for clearance to interview 'local experts' involved with Portland's mobile food and food cart vendors displaced by the Alder Pod evictions. After sending a largely unsuccessful round of cold calls and emails to food carts previously at the Alder Pod, I hit the streets to visit them in person. All five interviews enumerated in Table 2 derived from me walking up to food carts, introducing myself and my research, and scheduling a time to come back to conduct an interview. In my initial IRB proposal, I suggested meeting interview participants in a neutral location like a coffee shop. I quickly realized that was not realistic. Many mobile food vendors do not have that type of free time and would not find that convenient. Instead, I interviewed them while they were preparing food or

during the mid-afternoon lull between the lunch and dinner rushes. Instead of buying coffee and snacks for interview participants as compensation, I purchased food from their cart and left very generous tips. Finally, I had to simplify my consent form to account for vendors with English as a second language and those who might be turned off by the academic legalese; in fact, one potential interview participant was scared away by the original consent form. This streamlined consent form meant that I did not record audio transcripts, relying exclusively on handwritten notes and memory in writing this paper. Fortunately, I have audio transcripts of my interviews with local experts. I interviewed Leah Tucker from OMFA over coffee and Keith Jones over Zoom. The remainder were ad hoc text-based correspondences over email and WhatsApp.

During the beginning of the data collection and research process, my guiding question was to figure out what happened to the Alder Pod and why. As the research and writing process continued into fall 2023, my guiding question evolved, expanded, and split into wondering why events like the Alder Pod eviction are a repeating pattern and what their role in the future of Portland's mobile food might be. Chapter 1.3 explains this, and chapter 3 drives it home. Understood as such, Alder Pod and Block 216 are merely one of the largest, latest, most dramatic, and most traumatic links in a chain which ties back to perennial battles surrounding (culinary) gentrification and the right to the city. They relate to the contrast between downtown residential and office towers and the streetscape below, streetscapes that nourish and are nourished by the unapologetic presence of mobile food. It is about 'top-down' commercial urbanism and how downtowns are frequently developed or redeveloped in terms of corporate interests over



the interests of marginalized groups who forge livelihoods and communities in the public realm and who play an outsized role in giving cities their identity. This thesis is a tale of two cities and the future of Portland. It is the local explorations of questions that are central to the histories and futures of so many cities, both American and international.

This thesis does several things to suture together multiple lines of inquiry. First, it provides background on Portland's internationally renowned mobile food landscape, touching on its history and the unique regulatory ecology that allows it to flourish. Second, it presents a direct case study of Alder Street food cart pod in Portland, Oregon which in Summer 2019 was evicted to make way for Block 216, a 35-story mixed-used luxury tower that opened to the public on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023 (figure 2). It documents the character of the Alder Pod during the late 2010s, the eviction proceedings, and then bifurcates into two paths—one that traces what happened to the displaced ex-Alder Pod carts over the years since and another that outlines the (often unmet) promises and (often deliberately hidden) perils of Block 216. Third, it offers an analysis of recent trends in Portland's mobile food landscape, including the expunging of food carts from the city center due to rising property values, the design of next-generation food cart pods centered on class segregation and a turning-inward from the street, and speculative groundwork for the role of food carts in driving gentrification. Fourth, it offers a list of concrete and abstract policy—and praxis—proposals followed by critical avenues for future research on Portland's mobile food landscape. The first task is setting the stage, describing the Alder Pod, what it did for its denizens, and by implied corollary what Block 216 cost Portland.



Figure 2: Block 216 construction photos (photos credit: Cello Expressions Photography)

Picture the Alder Pod on a sunny day in late spring 2019 (figure 3). On the North side stands a heavily renovated but still quaint Chicago school building—the historic Pittock Block—which dates from 1914. Its large display windows, capped by green and white striped awnings, beckon invitingly to passing pedestrians and travelers on the adjoining westbound 15 and 51 buses which run down SW Washington Street. This face of the Pittock Block hosts, amongst others, a local crafts boutique, a small upmarket piercing studio, a shabby café, and the Oregon Symphony’s old offices. Heading a block further north brings one to Living Room Theaters, a small boutique theatre chain whose trademark is offering a full menu delivered to theatergoers’ seats as they sample from a balanced list of the latest blockbusters and international art film. Another block brings one to Burnside Street, a roaring two-lane east-west throughfare that is the price

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downtown Portland pays for its storied network of one way blacktop. Beyond Burnside Street hunches the colossal Powell's City of Books.



Figure 3: The Alder pod circa 2019 (image credits: The Oregonian and Friends of the Green Loop).

To the east of the pod rest two mid-rise Chicago school buildings on a slow north-south incline. Gazing from the pod across the narrow SW 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the left building serves as home to Finnigan's Toys & Gifts whose purple neon sign features a mischievous cat and whose window look onto aisles of colorful packaged playthings. To the right is the Woodlark Hotel and its den-like ground floor Bullard Tavern. Two blocks straight ahead lays Broadway Street, the informal dividing line between the West End district and the true CBD, and abutting Pioneer Square—or, “Portland's Living Room.”

Facing south from the pod, across SW Alder Street with its eastbound 15 bus line is the imposing Portland Galleria. As one of Portland's many fine examples of cast-iron architecture, the Galleria is home to a variety of retail locations, most notably the downtown Target. On the opposite side of the Galleria is a station for the MAX Light Rail's red and blue lines; caddy corner from it is Maya's Taqueria, known for its dazzling Mayan-themed muralism and thumping Hispanic grooves on the outdoor speaker system.

Finally, to the west of the pod stands the 511 Building, an early example of international style architecture dating from 1956. It holds primarily medical offices, including the Pacific Eye Clinic, a teaching clinic for Pacific University optometry students. Adjoining the 511 Building, on the site of what was half block food cart pod until May 2018, is the under construction Downtown Portland Moxy Hotel—unaware of the fate that will befall it in eight months when the pandemic lockdowns begins.<sup>1</sup> Separating these buildings from the Alder pod is the busy SW 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, rendered busier by a stretch of the Portland Streetcar A-line.

Also known affectionately as the “MotherPod,” the Alder pod was widely recognized as Portland’s largest second oldest, and perhaps most venerable food cart pod home to around 60 food carts at its peak.<sup>2</sup> Just like the pod on 5<sup>th</sup> and Stark that started it all, the Alder Pod began during the late 1990s.<sup>3</sup> *Ex-Portland Business Journal* journalist Aliza Earnshaw, responsible for some of the most in-depth turn-of-the-millennium coverage of Portland’s mobile food scene, recalls it being slightly more upscale and “professional” than Stark Pod with smaller carts.<sup>4</sup> The first borderline legible Google Earth satellite imagery circa July 2001 reveals at least four trailer-sized carts onsite. Also like the 5<sup>th</sup> and Stark Pod, the Alder Pod was situated on a lot owned by Downtown Development Group (DDG) who had held the land since the 50s as part of its family dynasty of pay-to-park lots. Though the center of the lot remained open as parking space, the outer edge

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<sup>1</sup> Singer, “One of Portland’s Most Popular Food Carts Is Closing Tomorrow to Make Way for a Luxury Hotel.”

<sup>2</sup> Jones, “Save Portland Food Carts, Organized by Keith Jones.”

<sup>3</sup> Powell, “Forced To Move, Portland’s Alder Street Food Carts Are Planning For The Future.”

<sup>4</sup> Earnshaw, Interview with Aliza Earnshaw.

gradually ringed wall-to-wall with food carts of many shapes and sizes facing the sidewalk and sheltered by trees.

Architecturally, the carts are a triumphant example of postmodernist folk architecture that exemplifies Venturi et al.'s archetypal "decorated shed [...] where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them."<sup>5</sup> Food carts are nothing if not function before form. These sheds-on-wheels may be custom jobs built by local cart manufacturers but are just as often retrofitted from campers, cargo trailers, food trucks, minibuses, and even more unorthodox sheds sheathing a small kitchen in a protective carapace of polycarbonate, wood, and steel. These sheds are encrusted in a layer of functional ducts, chimneys, stabilizers, and tanks which as more than the sum of their parts transform a generic shed into something with a distinctive silhouette and functional purpose (figure 4). Yet many food carts go a step further into the realm of creative expression with DIY decorations in

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<sup>5</sup> Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.

the form of vibrant signage, plants, dynamic lighting, murals, sound systems, sculptural elements, and more often tailored to their cuisine.

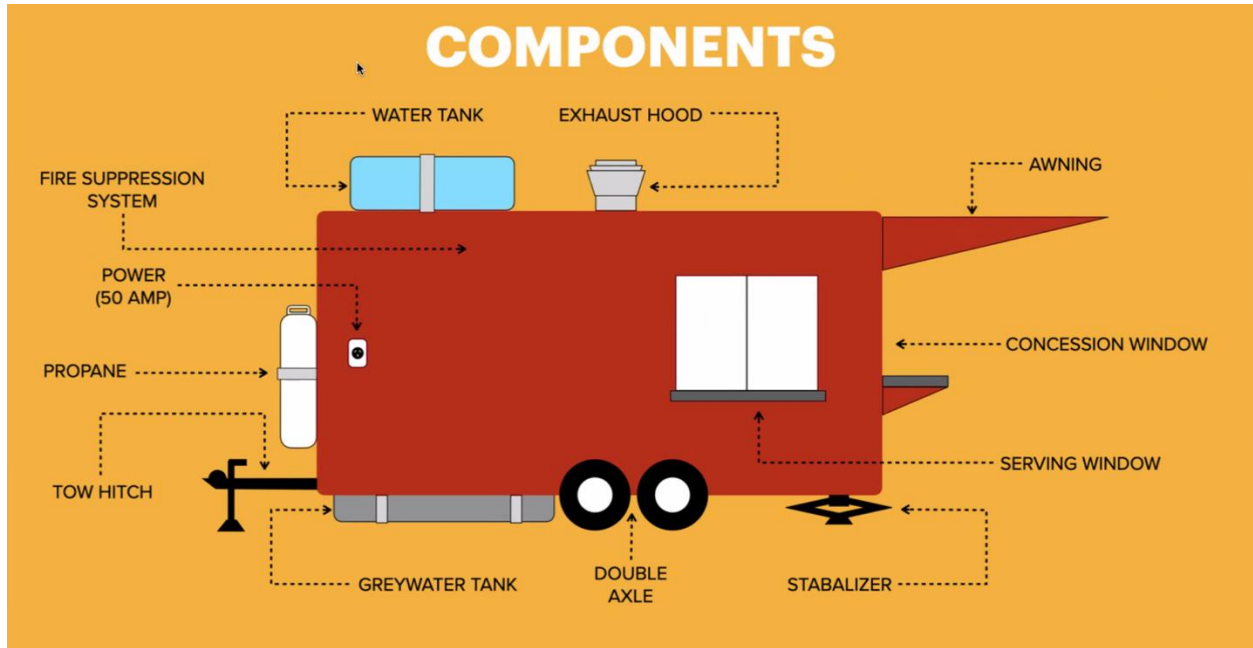


Figure 4: Anatomy of a conventional food cart, though designs vary dramatically (graphic courtesy Friends of the Green Loop).

These sheds-cum-carts modularly coalesce into a street scene which “complete with awnings, decks, and false storefronts, [gives] the impression of a classic Western frontier town’s main street in miniature,” emitting a fragrant wall of steam and clamor (figure 5).<sup>6</sup> The Alder Pod at its peak evokes a multiethnic vernacular counterpoint to the consumerist high-kitsch of Venturi et al.’s Las Vegas strip, the city’s commercial and visual axis. Both evince a sea of dynamism, where “[t]he rate of obsolescence of a sign seems to be nearer to that of an automobile than that of a building.”<sup>7</sup> The turnover rate in Vegas is a testament to the arms race between casinos competing for the most eye catching computer-controlled neon sign and stucco-slathered frontage to paint digestible

<sup>6</sup> Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia*.

<sup>7</sup> Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.

hyperreal pastiches of different eras and cultures—Caesar's Palace, Tropicana, Aladdin. The turnover rate at the Alder Pod is a testament to the unpredictability of the mobile food industry and the rate at which carts change ownership. Cart exteriors are speckled with sun-bleached plastic menus and gaudy sandwich boards advertising the global cuisine available at immigrant-run carts like Love Verona Pizza & Pasta, Island Grill, and Persian Sofreh. Both Vegas' casinos and Alder's carts present carefully cultivated façades in sharp contrast to "ill-kempt backsides" presiding over mechanical equipment, service areas, and parking infrastructure.<sup>8</sup> In Las Vegas, the backlots consist of lifeless soon-to-be Junkspace—"what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout" to be neglected and eventually demolished with the rest when the host casino or its façade-du-jour is deemed obsolete.<sup>9</sup> At the Alder Pod, the disarray is a microcosm of majority world street geography: chronic infrastructural underdevelopment made manifest to vendors and parking motorists alike.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the luxe, highly controlled Las Vegas strip populated by high-rollers, debauchers, gilded fools, and the hidden multitudes of underpaid service workers who cosset them, the 'sheds' of the Alder Pod 'strip' are a postmodern vernacular marketplace characterized by an organized-disorder, liveliness,

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<sup>8</sup> 12/7/2023 5:18:00 AM

<sup>9</sup> Koolhaas, "Junkspace."

<sup>10</sup> See chapter 1.3 for a brief discussion of the Alder Pod sanitation issues and how they arose from infrastructural neglect by the pod's landlords, not improper food safety or hygiene practices on the part of vendors and customers.

and diversity able to support and enhance public life, placemaking, and social interaction.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 5: Two visually interesting food carts in the Portland downtown (photos credit: author and KOIN6 News).

Over the span of two decades, the Alder pod evolved from the wasteful residue of car-centric urban planning to a vibrant culinary and cultural crossroads for locals and tourists alike. Every vendor I spoke with had fond memories of their time at the Alder pod.<sup>12</sup> Aimee, now a woman in her twenties, has been at Alder pod since the recession food cart boom. Her father Juan operated a cart, part of a larger family-run Mexican food business that he had founded in 2008 after immigrating to Portland from a small town in Northern Mexico. Juan's business had grown to three locations, the others managed by cousins—two food carts and one brick-in-mortar restaurant near Portland State University (PSU). Aimee spoke proudly of the family business as a way to share their

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<sup>11</sup> Caramaschi, "Counteracting Food Deserts. The Potential for Mobile Food Vending in Regenerating Contemporary Cities."

<sup>12</sup> This thesis in general, and these next few pages in particular, are indebted to the vendors who privileged me with stories about their time at the Alder pod and their oftentimes uncertain trajectories over the years since. My knowledge of this mobile food "sidewalk ballet," as Jane Jacobs might put it, is a collective assemblage of their words. Unfortunately, due to the nature of my rushed IRB process, I must keep them anonymous. The norm in mobile food scholarship is mentioning establishments and their proprietors by name; evidently most are proud of what they have built, the work they do, and wish to share both with the world. This sentiment certainly shone through in my interviews, and I hope it does here too.



culture, heritage, and way of life with fellow Portlanders at an affordable price while keeping quality high. Aimee practically grew up at the Alder pod, which she described as “really tight” and close-knit, many proprietors bonding over their immigrant backgrounds and the intense schedules demanded by the mobile food industry. Vendors were “comrades” that helped each other with odd jobs, borrowed ingredients, shared meals, and gave referrals. The vendors’ children played with each other in and around the Alder pod, their safety and relative discipline ensured by “eyes on the street.”<sup>13</sup> Omar, who has been at the Alder pod for roughly four years, favorably compared it to the dynamism of the Middle Eastern streetscapes he had spent decades in before immigrating to the United States during the Syrian civil war. Omar noted that some carts would play music from Bluetooth speakers, and many would hawk their food and offer samples, wryly noting that even the “white guys did it too.”

Four of the five vendors I spoke with—also the four that had been at the Alder pod the longest—said there was little true competition between the carts. Even the little competition that did exist was friendly. Aimee added that the other Alder pod Mexican carts had different menu items and distinct spice profiles, leading to differentiation and specialization. This sentiment was echoed by Leah Tucker of the Oregon Mobile Food Association (OMFA) and Keith Jones of Friends of the Green Loop who both referred to pods “snowballing”<sup>14</sup> or reaching a “critical mass” that was beneficial for all vendors.<sup>15</sup> A wide array of options and strong placemaking presence draws a greater number of

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<sup>13</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

<sup>14</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

customers per vendor, many of whom buy food from multiple carts over the course of a single visit.

Perhaps more interestingly was the relationship at the Alder Pod between vendors and homeless Portlanders.<sup>16</sup> Every vendor I spoke with described a tense relationship with homeless in the days since the Alder Pod was split up—no doubt exacerbated by the local and national housing crisis;<sup>17</sup> fentanyl epidemic;<sup>18</sup> and disastrously poor implementation of Ballot Measure 110, which defeloned methamphetamine possession starting in February 2021.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the relationship between Alder Pod vendors and homeless Portlanders was relatively amicable and mutually beneficial, cutting against popular press assumptions that homeless Portlanders are intrinsically antagonistic to and a liability for mobile food. There were 3-4 homeless Portlanders on the block who frequently did odd jobs for vendors in exchange for meals; Omar added that 80% of the food cart operators fed the homeless by the end of the day. Janice remembers saving up cans for homeless Portlanders she knew so they could sell them. Homeless Portlanders at the Alder pod panhandled with a light touch and kept an eye out for others encroaching on “their turf,” which in Omar’s eyes might spell trouble for the informal working relationship between the Alder vendors, pod’s homeless, and customers. During the decade Aimee spent at the

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<sup>16</sup> I use “homeless” instead of “houseless” because I argue is disingenuous and perniciously normalizing to insinuate that living without a roof over one’s head is anything other than dangerous, degrading, and unhygienic. Put differently, such conditions cannot constitute a home in any meaningful sense of the word. Moreover, new terminology gradually adopts the old stigmatic subtext as language shifts to match the unchanged underlying material conditions; the commentariat’s language games are not the same as actual social policy. According to Giselle Routhier, policy director for the Coalition for the Homeless, “[p]eople said as long as they’re being described with respect, they kind of don’t care.”

<sup>17</sup> Godvin, “Don’t Blame Drug Decriminalization for What the Housing Crisis Has Caused.”

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, “It’s Crazy out There.”

<sup>19</sup> Green, “Measure 110 Program Manager Resigns, Says State Was ‘Maliciously Negligent.’”

Alder pod, the worst breach of etiquette she remembered was one or two stolen tip jars. For most intents and purposes, the Alder pod provided a prosaic bliss. The cultural and legal infrastructure that enabled this bliss goes back decades, if not over a century.

## Chapter One: The History of Portland's Mobile Food and the Alder Pod

### *1.1: Mobile Food in the City of Roses, 1913-2008*

Fitting for a profession known for its immigrant entrepreneurs who seek a toehold in their city's economy and through it their own slice of the American pie, Portland's story with mobile food began in 1913 with Italian immigrant Joseph Gatto who sold produce from his horse drawn cart (figure 6).<sup>20</sup> Gatto expanded into a warehouse-based produce importer and wholesaler in 1930,<sup>21</sup> cementing what would become Gatto & Sons Produce, a family-run enterprise that exists to this day.<sup>22</sup> Friends of the Green Loop remarks that records on the presence of mobile food in Portland are sparse into the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, so the next widely agreed upon milestone dates from 1965 when Jewish entrepreneur Maury Dragoon opened Portland's first modern food stand vending Hebrew National kosher hot dogs across from city hall, in present day Pioneer Square.<sup>23</sup> As the story goes, Dragoon "offered the mayor and his staff free samples of his lunchtime fare. The mayor accepted and in doing so legitimized the food cart industry in Portland and laid the political foundation for their success today."<sup>24</sup> Pioneer Square was constructed on that location in 1984, replacing a parking lot. Today, Pioneer Square through the Carts on

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<sup>20</sup> Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia*; Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

<sup>21</sup> Chong, "Why Food Carts."

<sup>22</sup> "Gatto & Sons Produce - About Us."

<sup>23</sup> Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

<sup>24</sup> Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia*.

the Square program remains the only place in Portland where food carts can vend on public land.<sup>25</sup>



*Figure 6: Joseph Gatto's horse drawn produce cart circa 1929 parked at Southeast Clay and 7th Street (photo credit: Oregon Historical Society).*

Due at least in part to this fateful 1965 event, Portland began to liberalize their mobile food codes. Under the caveat that they “have changed databases twice, and names have changed,” Multnomah County has incomplete records of mobile food licenses that stretch back to the 1970s, including a license for Oaxaca Super Tacos food truck that opened during the 1970s and remained in business until 2016 (figure 7).<sup>26</sup> In 1976, the

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<sup>25</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>26</sup> Bridgeliner, “PDXplained: Tracking down the Oldest Food Cart in Portland.”

Parks Department “instituted competitive bidding for parks across the city” for potential mobile food vendors, which attracted pushcart operators like Sunshine Sandwiches.<sup>27</sup>



*Figure 7: Oaxaca Super Tacos circa May 2016 (photo credit Tara W. on Yelp).*

During the 1970s, larger-scale urban development measures also played a role in encouraging mobile food. Some credit Portland's nationally pioneering urban growth boundary and the enormously successful Portland Downtown Plan. Proposed in 1973 as the brainchild of Governor Tom McCall and fully implemented in 1979, Portland's urban growth boundary played a role in producing the density and “contained urbanism”

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<sup>27</sup> Giegerich, “In Their Own Words: The Story of Portland's Food Cart Phenomenon.”

necessary for mobile food to flourish.<sup>28</sup> Introduced in 1972 under the leadership of locally renown planner and architect Bing Sheldon, the Portland Downtown Plan backed by federal urban renewal money helped revitalize the city's stagnant urban core. The plan reenvisioned the city center as a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, public transit-fed, and historically picturesque public realm that would prove inviting to the downtown cart pods of later decades. Finally, in 1985, the City of Portland issued a forward-thinking moratorium on surface parking lots in the unusually underdeveloped city center.<sup>29</sup> The ordinance grandfathered in older lots,<sup>30</sup> including those owned by Downtown Development Group (DDG) since the 1950s, a family run company that began as a parking lot business which has since transitioned into a powerful real estate firm<sup>31</sup> and outsourced parking lot management to the Canadian company City Center Parking. Although DDG and Portland planners did not realize it, many of these parking lots would serve as prime sites for city center food cart pods.

Still, during the 1980s, there was reportedly one "modern" food cart in the city.<sup>32</sup> Portland's unique legislative situation allowed food carts to exist, and the planning environment ensured their lucrateness, but it took a while for food carts to emerge as a mass phenomenon. This began to slowly happen during the 1990s. During the mid 1990s, there were "approximately 100 licensed mobile units operating in Multnomah County."<sup>33</sup> One early hotspot was near the downtown Portland State University campus. By 1991 and

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<sup>28</sup> Marshall, "Foodie Heaven in a Parking Lot - What's the Secret of Portland's Success?"

<sup>29</sup> Giegerich, "In Their Own Words: The Story of Portland's Food Cart Phenomenon."

<sup>30</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>31</sup> Leatherby and Buhayar, "Welcome to Tax Breaklandia."

<sup>32</sup> Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

<sup>33</sup> "Mobile Unit Playbook."

intensifying as the 1990s wore on, small and highly mobile pushcart-adjacent food carts like Shelly's Honkin' Huge Burritos and Snow White Crepe sprouted up to serve ravenous, cash-strapped college students.<sup>34</sup> Other carts popped up downtown; for instance, "there was also a cart in a driveway on [SW] Division Street in the late 1990s that made and served sushi," which later became the local Thai restaurant chain Pok Pok.<sup>35</sup> Reading through abstracts and full texts from 1990s *Portland Business Journal* and *The Oregonian* articles suggests that many of these early downtown carts were situated on public sidewalks.<sup>36, 37</sup>

From a design perspective, early food carts tended to be hardscrabble and transient.<sup>38</sup> During the mid-1990s, the City of Portland began to take notice of these food carts, many of which were closer to scrappy, overbuilt pushcarts studded with DIY electrical wiring and poorly secured propane tanks (figure 8). The city's Bureau of Development Services "had some concern about the quality and safety of the pushcarts, [so] Jeff Joslin, then lead urban designer at the City of Portland, and others created

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<sup>34</sup> Giegerich, "In Their Own Words: The Story of Portland's Food Cart Phenomenon."

<sup>35</sup> Giegerich.

<sup>36</sup> Earnshaw, "Portland Has Its Own Version of Pung-Ap-Bang."

<sup>37</sup> Earnshaw, "What a Way to Make a Livin'."

<sup>38</sup> Earnshaw.

modest prescriptive design regulations for pushcarts that [...] were able to 'raise the bar' on pushcart design."<sup>39</sup>



Figure 8: Shelly's Burritos vending in Pioneer Square circa 2007. While abiding contemporaneous mobile food codes, the cart is representative of the form factor adopted by many of the earliest food carts (Taken from Kapell et al., "Food Cartology: Rethinking Urban Spaces and People Places.")

Until 1997, food carts in Portland were isolated affairs which were "really [...] just traditional mobile units, pulling into a parking lot, vending from that parking lot. Or an empty lot."<sup>40</sup> That fateful year, King Burrito set up shop in a DDG-owned parking lot at SW 5<sup>th</sup> and SW Stark Street.<sup>41</sup> It was soon joined by Saigon-To-Go, which opened at the

<sup>39</sup> Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia*.

<sup>40</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>41</sup> Renamed SW Harvey Milk Street in 2017 in honor of the San Francisco gay right activist and politician. The street is home to many historically significant gay bars and clubs. For the purposes of this paper, to prevent confusion, I will refer to it exclusively as SW Stark Street.



opposite corner of the same parking lot. These two carts were eventually joined by others, and the parking lot became

the first known instance of vendors using designated car parking spaces and an early example of carts clustering in one location. There was nothing in Portland's zoning codes, bylaws, or licensing conditions that stood in the way of this development, so other vendors gradually followed suit, renting spaces alongside others or in other available spaces. Rather than directly competing, clusters of carts formed micro-agglomeration economies that became known as a food cart pods.<sup>42</sup>

Food carts began building a stable presence in the city center and wider urban foodscape over the next decade, occupying parking lots in the city center and disused brownfield sites in outer-urban neighborhoods. An August 1998 article in the *Portland Business Journal* references “tremendous competition for the best sites” which, for relatively modest \$60 application fees, attracted customers along central pedestrian corridors.<sup>43</sup> In August 1998, “there [were] 25 to 30 carts and trucks operating in the downtown area” which fluctuated from week-to-week due to high turnover rates.<sup>44</sup> In 2001, 175 carts vied for four spots along the downtown South Park Blocks; in 2001, carts began opening in the Cully neighborhood in Northeast Portland; and in 2007, carts began opening in the Sellwood neighborhood in South Portland.<sup>45</sup> In 2005, the number of food carts in the city sat at 300; by 2008, that number was roughly 470;<sup>46</sup> and by 2010, it had reached 600.<sup>47</sup> Between 2008 and 2010, some of the first purpose-built food cart pods such as Cartopia and Hawthorne Asylum were established. These include amenities like dedicated seating

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<sup>42</sup> Koch, “Licensing, Popular Practices and Public Spaces.”

<sup>43</sup> Koch.

<sup>44</sup> Earnshaw, “What a Way to Make a Livin’.”

<sup>45</sup> Wester et al., “Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology.”

<sup>46</sup> Kapell et al., “Food Cartology: Rethinking Urban Spaces as People Places.”

<sup>47</sup> Giegerich, “In Their Own Words: The Story of Portland’s Food Cart Phenomenon.”

areas shielded from the elements; water, electrical, and sewage connections for food carts; themed décor; trash, recycling, and compost receptacles; and even plumbed toilets.

Perhaps ambivalently, this efflorescence was driven in part by gentrification from “the new young, creative, people moving to Portland” who form the core of city center food cart clientele,<sup>48</sup> not to mention a growing fraction of its entrepreneurs.<sup>49,50</sup> City (re)development plans oriented around the hipster *habitus*, such as those that kickstarted the upmarket Pearl District during the early 2000s, have generated a positive feedback loop between upscale housing, cultural amenities, retail, and mobile food that continues to this day (see figure 1). Another important contributor was national and international press coverage of Portland's mobile food landscape from outlets as diverse as *The New York Times*' travel column,<sup>51</sup> *The Guardian*, *The Calgary Herald*, Dubai's *Khaleej Times*, *Bon Appétit*, and the popular sketch comedy TV show *Portlandia*, which debuted in January 2011 and over its seven-year run has done much to globally cement the image of Portland as a hotspot for foodie culture and progressive bohemianism more broadly.<sup>52</sup> Travel Portland, a venerable nonprofit that supports the city's tourism industry, has also been promoting the city's mobile food for well over a decade. For instance, it maintains an online food cart map which lists active food cart pods.<sup>53</sup>

Hipster boosterism and media coverage are two driving factors, but it is universally acknowledged that the largest contributor to the rapid growth in Portland's food carts

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<sup>48</sup> Giegerich.

<sup>49</sup> Hanser and Hyde, “Foodies Remaking Cities.”

<sup>50</sup> I will revisit this point and other criticisms later in the thesis.

<sup>51</sup> Iaboni, “Video.”

<sup>52</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, “Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?”

<sup>53</sup> “Portland Food Cart Finder - Portland Food Pods.”

during the end of the 2000s was the 2008 recession. According to Leah Tucker, mobile food veteran and founder of the Oregon Mobile Food Association (OMFA) which “serve[s] as a central hub of communication and information, a catering referral, information resource, and provide[s] local and state-level proactive lobbying and advocacy”<sup>54</sup> for mobile food vendors (many of whom do not have the financial resources and legal know-how to do such things for themselves),<sup>55</sup>

at the time, the stark difference between how much it [cost] to get into a brick and mortar restaurant and a mobile food operation [...] was astronomical. The capital investment of a mobile food unit at the time was so drastically less than what you would see from a brick and mortar. So, during the recession, it was really kind of the only way for restauranteurs or people who really wanted to do this kind of work [...] to get back into it. [...] We want to serve food and we want to make people happy with food, and we're very passionate about that. So, we found alternatives. And in 2008, that was mobile food.<sup>56</sup>

Tucker's testament is mirrored in practically all the academic and popular press coverage of Portland's mobile food scene during the late 2000s and early 2010s.

Still, and as Tucker emphasizes elsewhere, the contingent of mobile food owner-operators included not only veteran restauranteurs forced to downscale and hip young kids with a passion for gastronomy “coming up from behind,” but a very large number of recent immigrants and people of color.<sup>57</sup> In a 2008 citywide survey of 54 food carts, over half the vendors outside the CBD were Latine, compared to “a greater mix of ethnicities [...] within the CBD.”<sup>58</sup> The study continues, reporting that “in addition, more than half (51%) of the vendors surveyed were born outside of the US.”<sup>59</sup> A disproportionate number

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<sup>54</sup> “About Us | Oregon Mobile Food Association.”

<sup>55</sup> Wester et al., “Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology.”

<sup>56</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>57</sup> With apologies to James Murphy of LCD Soundsystem

<sup>58</sup> Kapell et al., “Food Cartology: Rethinking Urban Spaces as People Places.”

<sup>59</sup> Kapell et al.

of Portland's food cart vendors are immigrants and people of color.<sup>60</sup> Though there are many highly publicized cases of vendor success stories; however, the industry is ultimately one characterized by razor-thin profit margins, locational precariousness, long days, and high failure rates. Still, for food cart vendors, the business model has become their livelihood, serving as a site of self-actualization, cultural pride, and economic independence from wage labor. Despite the hardships, food cart vendors love what they do, and those I interviewed wouldn't trade it for the world. For recent immigrants without the cultural capital and command of English to succeed in the traditional workforce, food carts became one of the most accessible pathways to a comfortable financial existence in America.<sup>61</sup>

In the CBD, at heavily trafficked sites such as the Alder pod, vendors "could work for three or four hours a day during the lunch shift and make as much as some of these other carts make in an entire week working from 11:00 [AM] to 8:00 [PM]."<sup>62</sup> Research from the late 2010s argues that this disparity between the CBD and other regions, including the Portland Eastside, still holds.<sup>63</sup> These findings suggest certain racialized and classed undercurrent to which vendors benefit the most from Portland's mobile food economy that will be returned to in chapter three of this thesis on post-2008 changes to

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<sup>60</sup> Portland and Oregon in general are known for being notoriously white due to a long history of racial exclusion laws, redlining, and grassroots white supremacy that persisted through the 1990s that were predominantly targeted against Blacks and Chinese. Oregon gained statehood in 1869 and was the only state to do so with Black exclusion laws. In "Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon," Shah mentions contemporary Portland is the only city in America without a single minority-majority neighborhood after the majority Black Albina neighborhood was decimated by gentrification during the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.

<sup>61</sup> Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

<sup>62</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>63</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, "Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?"

the mobile food landscape. Next, while the preceding sketch of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century history of the landscape touches on some elements of the city's unique land use and zoning decisions that set the ground for food carts, it is necessary to discuss the specifics of what makes contemporary food carts and food cart pods possible.

### *1.2: Mobile Food Regulation and Licensure*

In short, it is only due to Portland's unique regulatory regimen that food cart pods exist at all. For the context of this paper, I follow Regan Koch's observation that

there is a tendency in critical scholarship to throw around [words like 'surveillance' and 'discipline'] somewhat hyperbolically in critiques of government power. Academic versions of state phobia can make it difficult to imagine policing and regulation as ever being pursued for legitimately public purposes.<sup>64</sup>

While this perhaps more critical approach is frequently analytically sophisticated, socially responsive, and politically probing, it is not suitable for all research subjects or contexts. Such scholarship often elides the 'how' for the 'what,' assessing the at-times provocative effects of government power over the more mundane mechanics of how police power is actually codified and articulated. Moreover, well-meaning but often unsuitable or kneejerk Foucauldian critiques of governmentality can ironically open the door to legitimating and invisibilizing the deregulation and the avarices of the so-called 'free market.' I agree with Koch's argument that:

licensing should not be instinctively viewed as an undesirable form of social control. Requiring practitioners to demonstrate basic competencies and satisfy certain conditions might be more adequately characterized as a form of 'caring surveillance': a type of policing easily overlooked by urban scholars attuned to registering encroachments upon public life.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Koch, "Licensing, Popular Practices and Public Spaces."

<sup>65</sup> Koch.

Just as ironically, a prime enabler of food carts are *laissez-faire* and flexible regulation compared against many other American cities. These can be condensed to five key points: few strictures when vending on private land, operating in the regulatory sweet-spot between vehicles and restaurants, streamlined and inexpensive licensure, an absence of license caps, and recent regulatory changes that work with carts—putting the compliance onus on landlords instead. Firstly, despite having “laws [that] are quite restrictive in terms of vending in public space,” there are few requirements for vending on private lots<sup>66</sup> as long as they are paved and zoned for retail use.<sup>67</sup> Vendors do not need to seek approval from nearby businesses, file a sidewalk use permit, acquire a specialized fire safety permit (except for propane tanks), or jump through other costly, confusing, and time-consuming red tape that many other cities mandate.

Secondly, food carts are regulated like vehicles as long as they have wheels, despite not being mobile and, in many cases, actually attached to the ground via DIY bar seating, awnings, and decorative siding. Vehicle status means food carts are exempt from provisioning bathrooms for customers,<sup>68</sup> disabled access, certain aspects of fire code, and service charges for using urban infrastructure.<sup>69</sup> Even though some of these modest requirements are shirked—perhaps most commonly those related to proper wastewater disposal<sup>70</sup>—“Portland City code compliance is complaint driven; that is, [regulators] are

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<sup>66</sup> Koch.

<sup>67</sup> Wester et al., “Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology.”

<sup>68</sup> Though onsite or cart-specific bathrooms are not required, the Multnomah County Health Department required vendors to acquire a restroom agreement for employees and customers within 200ft of their vending location. These agreements are usually with neighboring businesses.

<sup>69</sup> Koch, “Licensing, Popular Practices and Public Spaces.”

<sup>70</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

not out looking for problems. As long as the community supports food carts, the City just leaves well enough alone.”<sup>71</sup>

Thirdly, getting into the industry is relatively cheap, quick, and easy to navigate.<sup>72</sup> In 2018, it cost on average \$1,877 in licensing fees to get started and roughly \$5,410 in annual regulatory operating costs—placing Portland first amongst 20 cities as the best place to operate a food truck, although only eighth in terms of licensing fees.<sup>73</sup> One of the reasons is the Multnomah County Health Department (MCHD) has treated the highest class of mobile food operations—which contains food carts—the same as restaurants since 1997, when it merged the food cart and restaurant code food safety codes (figure 9).<sup>74</sup> As figure 9 demonstrates, food carts are also allowed to prepare all the same types of food that brick-and-mortar restaurants can without being tied to a commissary kitchen. This regulatory approach has picked up steam in recent years. Not only does it reduce red tape and associated costs, but it combats the common prejudice that mobile food establishments are less sanitary than brick-and-mortar restaurants. Indeed, a 2014 metanalysis of over 263,000 inspection reports from seven large American cities concluded that “trucks and carts did just as well if not slightly better during sanitation inspections than restaurants—and violations by all types of food businesses were rare. The notion that food trucks and carts are unsafe is simply a myth.”<sup>75</sup> Multnomah County health officials had reached a similar conclusion in 2009.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, obtaining liquor

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<sup>71</sup> Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia*.

<sup>72</sup> Koch, “Licensing, Popular Practices and Public Spaces.”

<sup>73</sup> Hendrix and Bowdish, “Food Truck Nation.”

<sup>74</sup> Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia*.

<sup>75</sup> Erickson, “Street Eats, Safe Eats.”

<sup>76</sup> Mesh, “Cartpocalypse!”

licenses is “insanely cheap” at just \$800 for a permanent license or \$35 for a temporary liquor license, and since 2012 it has been “possible for food carts in Portland to get a license as long as people drink within the pod.”<sup>77</sup> The Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission “actively tries” to ensure that qualified applicants get their license within 90 days.<sup>78</sup>



### CLASS I

- No potable water required or handwashing station;
- Can only serve prepackaged\* foods;
- Mult Co licenses very few Class 1 mobile units.



### CLASS II

- 5 gallons of warm potable water required for handwashing station;
- Can serve prepackaged foods and unpackaged foods\*\*;
- No preparation or assembly of food items is allowed.



### CLASS III

- Can serve a full menu with restriction on raw animal proteins that may not be processed or cooked on the unit;
- Commissary often required for Class 3 units;
- Dishwashing sink or dishwasher required if not using commissary.



### CLASS IV

- Prepare and serve a full menu;
- All requirements from other classes are required;
- Three compartment dishwashing sink or commercial dishwasher is required.

*Figure 9: MCHD mobile food unit classes. Food carts virtually always fall into Class IV (taken from Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology" and created by Evergreen Community Planning).*

Fourthly, Portland's mobile food industry benefits from not having license caps limiting the number of mobile food vending permits or liquor licenses. License caps

<sup>77</sup> Walker, "The Regulations That Helped Grow Portland's Explosive Food Scene."

<sup>78</sup> Walker.



bedevil vendors in cities like New York leaving vendors vulnerable to grey market license rental schemes,<sup>79</sup> despite slow attempts at reform.<sup>80</sup> By doing without them, Portland is able to foster a competitive environment with a relatively low barrier to entry and relatively even playing field. Finally, recent regulation extensions tend to emphasize the responsibility of landowners to provision sanitation features and amenities instead of foisting those extra costs and concerns upon vendors.<sup>81</sup> This stands in contrast to the recession boom when concerned regulators struggled to catch up to vendor's heady DIY experimentation, leading to an antagonistic regulatory environment where "you could get away with whatever you wanted until you couldn't,"<sup>82</sup> for instance the Bureau of Development Services late 2010 ban on decks, citing fire hazards.<sup>83</sup> Starting in January 2022, MCHD's "new rules shift some responsibilities for basic sanitation, health and safety from those who run food carts to pod operators," wastewater disposal and spill control plan, garbage and recycling plans, pest control, power utilities, and 5-foot cart spacing requirements.<sup>84</sup> Crucially, the new requirements do not grandfather in older pods; all landowners must upgrade their pods to meet the new standards.<sup>85</sup>

With these five points in mind, when it became clear that an alternative pathway—the food cart pod—was not only possible but profitable, virtually all mobile food vendors with the means made the switch. Curbside vending from pushcarts, like in

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<sup>79</sup> Koch, "Licensing, Popular Practices and Public Spaces."

<sup>80</sup> Chen, "New York Has Issued 14 New Food Cart Permits. 10,000 Vendors Want Them."

<sup>81</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>82</sup> Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

<sup>83</sup> Mesh, "Cartpocalypse!"

<sup>84</sup> Multnomah County Environmental Health, "Food Cart Pods."

<sup>85</sup> "Food Cart Pods Can Soon Apply for New License; Inspections to Begin Early 2022."

many American cities such as Boston,<sup>86</sup> Seattle,<sup>87</sup> and San Francisco, is a licensing headache.<sup>88</sup> In 2015, less than ten vendors used Portland's city sidewalks, "very little vending" takes place in parks,<sup>89</sup> and at the time in order to vend food in the city, pushcarts need approval from every establishment on the block.<sup>90</sup> In fact, today only three businesses downtown have pushcarts, and one is affiliated with a local Mexican restaurant chain that drops it off and picks it up daily—thereby obviating the otherwise expensive and unwieldy need for a commissary kitchen.<sup>91</sup>

While unfriendly to other mobile food typologies, the unique and permissive regulatory environment for food carts allows them to flourish; however, the story is of course less straightforward than Multnomah County and City of Portland police power. Indeed, food cart pods in the CBD have been threatened by a renewed wave of post-recession development and investment in the city center during the last decade, alongside the social and (bio)political fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study of Block 216 and the Alder pod at the heart of this thesis serves as dramatic synecdoche for these broader, deeply ambivalent changes in the Portland mobile food landscape.

### *1.3: Exodus, The Long March from Alder to Ankeny*

To those in the know, the writing was on the wall for the Alder pod well before spring 2019. Though Portland's urban growth boundary have created an uncommonly

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<sup>86</sup> Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

<sup>87</sup> Koch, "Licensing, Popular Practices and Public Spaces."

<sup>88</sup> Caramaschi, "Ingredients for Displacement."

<sup>89</sup> Koch, "Licensing, Popular Practices and Public Spaces."

<sup>90</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>91</sup> Jones.

dense outer-urban fabric that allows outer-urban food cart pods to flourish, the ability of food cart pods to take off in the central city is a function of a “relatively underdeveloped” urban core that featured many underutilized vacant or pay-to-park lots.<sup>92</sup> Without the 2008 recession that slowed down downtown development, many of those lots would have likely been developed years earlier. As Tucker put it, landowners like DDG which owned the Alder Pod and Stark Pod were

still having to pay [...] all of the property fees for owning a piece of property in the middle of downtown Portland. But there's no revenue. They can't build to create revenue because we have a recession and much like what we've seen in the last year, so it becomes very, very expensive. So [food carts became] a good stopgap: [landowners] could create a revenue stream and really not invest any actual capital investment on the property. [...] When the economy turned back around, the property owner realized that they had a viable, large viable piece of property in a very, very enticing area. And developers went 'you know what? we could do better if we took out all these carts and built, you know, a big apartment building' I think that's what's there now.<sup>93</sup>

Ultimately, the disproportionately immigrant and minority small business owners who established a livelihood for themselves at the Alder pod were, as a 2019 editorial in *Civil Eats* adroitly put it “displaced by successive waves of people attracted to the very culture [they] helped create.”<sup>94</sup> The Alder pod was also not the first food cart pod to fall victim to development interests and their own success. In late 2012, D-street Noshery on SE Division and 23<sup>rd</sup> closed to make way for apartments—possibly the first shuttering of its kind.<sup>95</sup> While a few closures were narrowly avoided, a slew of others occurred over the mid 2010s, mostly making way for apartments and mixed-use five-over-ones,<sup>96</sup> except for one bizarre instance where property managers wanted to turn a pod back into a regular

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<sup>92</sup> Jones.

<sup>93</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>94</sup> Seibel, “Can Portland's Food Carts Survive the City's Development Boom?”

<sup>95</sup> Njus, “Can Food-Cart Pods Survive Portland's Development Boom?”

<sup>96</sup> Korfhage, “Drink Mobile,” October 15, 2014.

parking lot.<sup>97</sup> In October 2017, Tidbits on SE Division and 28<sup>th</sup> was shuttered, the landowners reneging on a 5-year lease to make way for a four story mixed-used development.<sup>98</sup> Some commentaries considered Tidbit a newer, more durable model for food cart pods, “designed not as stopgaps for new development but rather a viable business model all to themselves, centered around beer carts as both draw and profit center.”<sup>99</sup> Two other pods closed in summer 2017, The Gantry in Portland's trendy East Waterfront and The Cubby Hole in Northeast Portland, with landowners citing future development plans as their rationale.<sup>100</sup> Evidently even this new model is not safe, considering the closures. Similarly, as touched upon earlier, the half block pod adjacent to the Alder pod was demolished in May 2018 to make way for the Portland Downtown Moxy Hotel, a trendy subsidiary of the global Marriott franchise.<sup>101</sup>

Even the Alder pod had been near the chopping block since at least 2016. That February, DDG publicized their Ankeny Blocks proposal which earmarked many of their downtown properties, including the Alder Pod, Stark Pod, and the pod at SW 3<sup>rd</sup> and Washington, for redevelopment.<sup>102</sup> On March 18<sup>th</sup> 2017, DDG filed paperwork to develop the pod, and by April “architect DLR Group filed an application seeking permission to turn one of Portland's most popular food cart pods into a 177-room, 11-story hotel

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<sup>97</sup> Skegg, “Another Food Cart Pod Bites the Dust.” Ironically, as of October 2023, there is one food cart onsite. To quote American hip-hop duo Gang Starr, “Underground will live forever, baby/ We just like roaches, never dyin', always livin'...”

<sup>98</sup> Korfhage, “One of the Largest and Most Popular Food Cart Pods in Portland Is Closing to Become Apartments.”

<sup>99</sup> Korfhage.

<sup>100</sup> Bamman, “Two More Food Cart Pods Close.”

<sup>101</sup> Singer, “One of Portland's Most Popular Food Carts Is Closing Tomorrow to Make Way for a Luxury Hotel.”

<sup>102</sup> Burmeister, “Portland's Downtown Food Cart Pods To Close.”

developed and run by Minneapolis' Graves Hospitality."<sup>103</sup> The deal ultimately fell through; however, DDG's interest remained open and was eventually actualized through Block 216 in 2019.

Though food cart owners with the requisite cultural capital, social capital, and determination are some of the most vocal—albeit often powerless—watchdogs for their collective livelihoods, they can just as easily slip through the cracks. Tucker likened the Alder pod situation to a “horrible game of telephone,” where

if you had talked to the original cart and truck owners who had parked in that lot, every one of them probably would have told you this is a short term deal—“we're not going to be here that long, it's really just until this recession is over. And then the developer is going to do whatever they're going to do with the property and I've got to move on.” Every one of those card owners knew that. But what happens over time is that those carts sell or move out. That piece of the story doesn't get relayed to the next owner. Or maybe it does on that first one but not the subsequent ones.<sup>104</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, but not necessarily standing in contradiction, is an eminently understandable boy-who-cried-wolf mentality amongst vendors who hear

“they're gonna build” [over and over] and it never happens, right? You've heard that for 10 years now, right? You've heard for 10 years. 18 years, right? It's like, “I'll believe it when I see it”. Literally up to the day that those carts were put on trailers and hauled out, we were still hearing, “I believe when I see it.” That's how deeply seated that belief that this was never going to happen was. And to their credit, 20 years in one spot, you don't anticipate. Why would you? It's the biggest pod in the city. It's well loved. It was a massive hub. Who would get rid of that?<sup>105</sup>

There are additional factors in play, such as the sense of denial that comes with a seemingly insurmountable and totalizing threat to one's livelihood; the fight-or-flight reflex which springs from that, stymieing effective action; and the rational economic brinkmanship when jumping ship from Portland's most lucrative food cart pod that

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<sup>103</sup> Herron, “Southwest Washington Food Cart Pod May Soon Be Replaced With 33-Story Mixed Use Building.”

<sup>104</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>105</sup> Tucker.

intensified during the final days before the move-out.<sup>106</sup> Finally, perhaps most the tangible factor was the language barrier that many of the immigrant vendors faced, including Janice's husband Danny and Aimee's father Juan. Despite it being exceedingly well established in the literature that immigrants comprise a high percentage of food cart owner-operators,<sup>107</sup> DDG and the City of Portland made negligible effort to provide bilingual materials or translation services for the duration of the project.<sup>108</sup>

Given the cultural climate, historical precedent, language barrier, and other circumstances, it was unsurprising many of the vendors were caught unawares at the sudden redevelopment push. Even more damning, City Center Parking actively and explicitly deceived the vendors in order to extract rent from them as long as possible, informing them the development project would not happen, right until serving them a 30-day eviction notice on the night of May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019.<sup>109</sup> City Center Parking also refused to clear the lot to create the space for cart towing, saying that would deprive it of parking revenue. Eventually Brian Ownedoff, BPM's real estate representative and owner of BMO Real Estate LLC, compensated City Center Parking for projected revenue losses, and it closed the lot.<sup>110</sup> One can speculate that this strategy was also formulated to shorten the inevitable period of public outcry and likely spate of bad press directed towards City

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<sup>106</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>107</sup> Kapell et al., "Food Cartology: Rethinking Urban Spaces as People Places."

<sup>108</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>109</sup> Jones.

<sup>110</sup> Jones.

Center Parking and the developers. After all, BPM knew they had to break ground by early July to qualify for certain federal Opportunity Zone benefits.<sup>111, 112</sup>

On top of the crisis' complexity and novelty for many vendors, City Center Parking's disinformation campaign likely stymied early efforts to relocate the Alder pod carts. During the early days, property owners from the Portland outskirts dropped off flyers bombarding vendors with offers to buy their carts or rent a new spaces in the culinary hinterlands.<sup>113</sup> Every vendor I spoke with expressed impassioned, if somewhat confused or conflicting, specifics of the negotiation process and its myriad injustices. For instance, Janice recalled that the developers said they would "take care of [the displaced vendors]" but ultimately did nothing to help them. Relocation efforts were started by the Bureau of Development Services in late 2018 but were swiftly taken up by the nonprofit Friends of the Green Loop with the blessing of City Commissioner Eudaley. In October 2018, around the time of the initial notice of public hearing, Friends of the Green Loop worked with many of the Alder Pod vendors to scout relocation options (figure 10). Since spring 2019, it brokered weekly meetings between the food cart owners, city officials, and Owendoff.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> News, "Portland's Largest Food Cart Pod Will Be Gone by June 30, Making Room for Development."

<sup>112</sup> See the subchapter "The Supply Side Slight of Opportunity Zones" for more on Block 216's use of OZs.

<sup>113</sup> Damewood, "The Disappearing Food Cart."

<sup>114</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.



Figure 10: Notice of public hearing for Block 216 staked on the edge of the Alder pod; although the sign was posted in multiple locations on the block, none of the notices were posted in languages other than English (photo credit: author).

Friends of the Green loop began a hard-fought and somewhat successful fundraising effort to facilitate the relocation process during the 30-day pre- eviction window. On June 24th, Friends of the Green Loop set up a GoFundMe campaign to relocate the carts with an ambitious \$300,000 goal.<sup>115</sup> It raised \$15,791 dollars during the very limited window, in part thanks to multiple publicity boosts from *Willamette Week*<sup>116</sup> and *The Oregonian*.<sup>117</sup> Friends of the Green Loop received an additional \$25,000 from Travel Portland.<sup>118</sup> Friends

<sup>115</sup> Jones, "Save Portland Food Carts, Organized by Keith Jones."

<sup>116</sup> Singer, "A Fundraising Campaign Hopes to Raise \$300,000 to Relocate the Alder Street Food Carts."

<sup>117</sup> Powell, "Forced To Move, Portland's Alder Street Food Carts Are Planning For The Future."

<sup>118</sup> Powell, "Portland's Displaced Alder Street Food Carts Moving To Ankeny Square."



of the Green Loop also organized a fundraising dinner a month after the moveout.<sup>119</sup>

Called the Alder

Street Food Cart Feast, according to email correspondence with Jones, it “did not raise that much. It was more for getting the word out and keeping [the carts] in the public’s mind.” Lastly, Prosper Portland, the economic and urban development agency for the city, offered an empty lot to store the displaced carts for free as long as would be necessary.<sup>120</sup>

The relocation process took from June 28th to June 30th and was an extraordinarily challenging experience.<sup>121</sup> The original towing contract fell through, and many of the carts were not in tow-worthy condition to begin with. For instance, one older cart had wooden sides so rotten that Jones could stick his finger through the wood while another’s tires were not only flat but melted into the asphalt. Although the carts had to be moved out in daily shifts due to towing throughput, nearly every vendor wanted to stay open until the final day. Several vendors considered refusing to leave entirely. The conflict reached a tipping point when Janice took a group of vendors over to city hall to ask City Commissioner Eudaley if she could vouch for Jones. Eudaley did. Janice then systematically went around the pod and spoke with every vendor, convincing them to cooperate with Jones and Friends of the Green Loop. Jones described Janice as a “force of nature,” and she is affectionately known by the former Alder pod vendors as the “Queen of Alder Street.” By 7:00 PM on June 30<sup>th</sup>, all the carts had been safely transferred from

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<sup>119</sup> “Alder Street Food Cart Feast | Aug 22 | Willamette Week.”

<sup>120</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>121</sup> All the information in this paragraph comes from my interview with Keith Jones.

the former Alder pod to the lot owned by Prosper Portland. Block 216 broke ground on July 12<sup>th</sup>, and the developers provided nothing to aid with the relocation process despite agreeing to do so with a handshake deal during the proceedings.<sup>122</sup>

Thus begins a period Jones refers to as “the wilderness,” where the Alder carts “went into a holding pattern” due both to the pandemic and legally unprecedented, bureaucratically complex, and ever-shifting relocation plans.<sup>123</sup> The remaining carts only emerged from limbo two years later when the Ankeny West pod—The Cart Blocks—opened alongside the rest of the city center on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021.<sup>124</sup> The specifics are technical and beset by nearly two years of Brownian non-motion and bureaucratic crosstalk common due to the siloed city government and legally innovative nature of Friends of the Green Loop's proposal. As Jones put it, the two year odyssey was composed of “a million details that change daily, sometimes hourly.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, specifics are more appropriate for an internal city policy brief or archival report than an undergraduate thesis. I will cover the broad thrust of the process instead.

The first order of business for Friends of the Green Loop and the Alder carts was finding a new location. As the name suggests Friends of the Green Loop is an NGO whose primary focus is advocating the eponymous Green Loop (figure 11). The Green Loop is a six-mile linear park concept envisioned in 2010 as part of the city's 2035 Central City Plan; it would to establish connective tissue between existing green spaces, build new green

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<sup>122</sup> Bell, “Groundbreaking Marks Start of \$600M Ritz-Carlton Project.”

<sup>123</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>124</sup> “Grand Opening of Cart Blocks.”

<sup>125</sup> Singer, “A Fundraising Campaign Hopes to Raise \$300,000 to Relocate the Alder Street Food Carts.”

spaces, and promote active transit (fig 9).<sup>126</sup> One method Friends of the Green Loop is using to realize the Green Loop's connective tissue is the Culinary Corridor project. Initially envisioned in 2018 by journalist, organizer, and public intellectual Randy Gragg with the support of the Portland City Council, mayor Ted Wheeler, and Commissioner Eudaly, the Culinary Corridor would "move the food carts into the right of way," taking back the streets from car traffic.<sup>127</sup> According to a website post from 2020, Ankeny Square was meant to be phase one of the Culinary Corridor, with O'Bryant Square (now Darcelle VX Plaza)<sup>128</sup> following "shortly thereafter" as phase two.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> "About the Green Loop | Portland.Gov."

<sup>127</sup> "The Culinary Corridor."

<sup>128</sup> See the chapter "The Curious Case of Darcelle XV Plaza" for more information on phase two.

<sup>129</sup> "The Culinary Corridor."

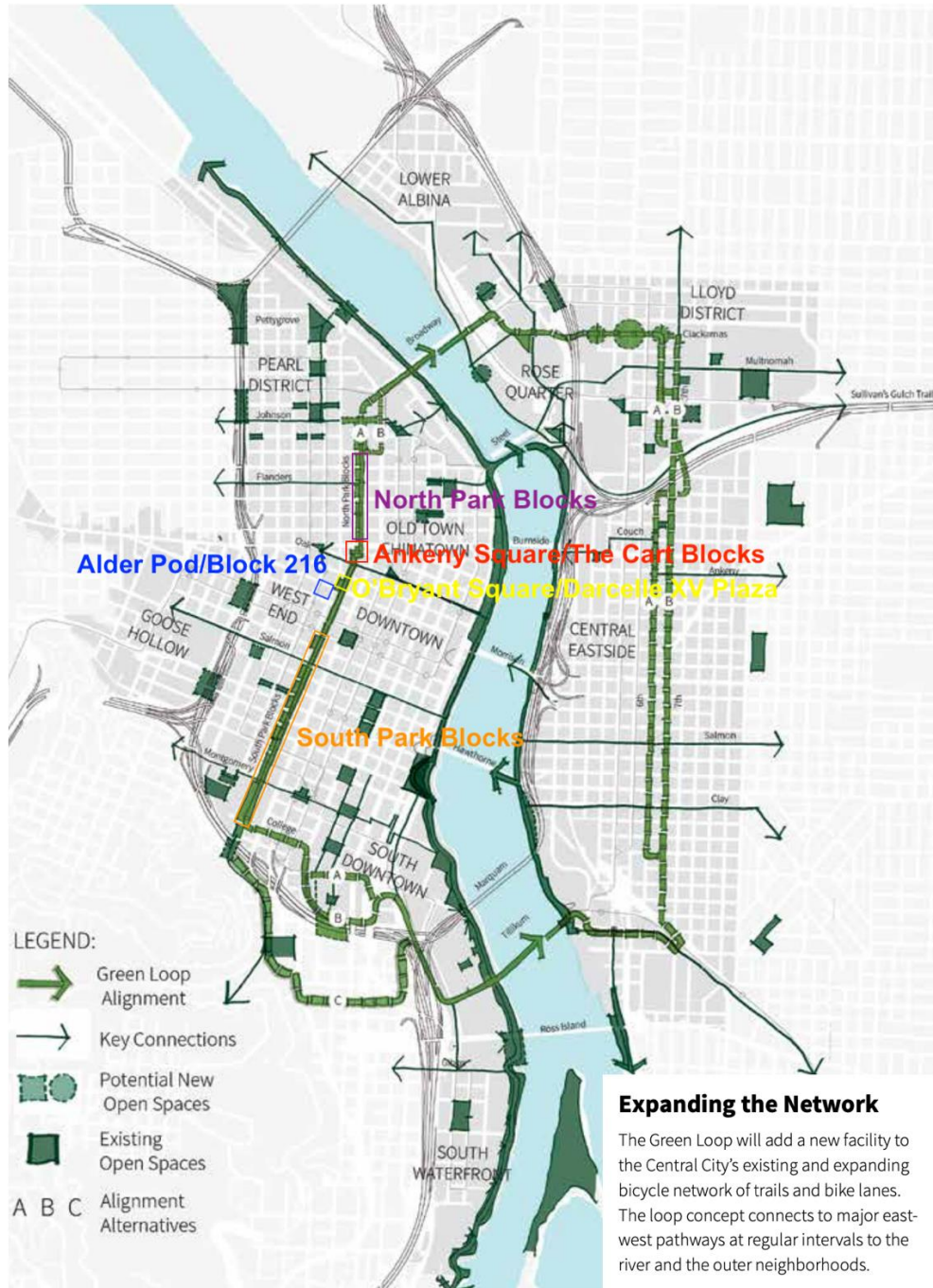


Figure 11: Green Loop concept art from 2016; relevant locations are marked in primary and secondary colors (graphic credit: Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability).

In 2019, none of this was certain. Friends of the Green Loop and city officials considered multiple locations near the Alder pod to hopefully preserve existing clientele and some of the old pod's aura; however, the first three proposals were methodically shut down. As Janice pithily put it: first, Keith said he would put them in the right-of-way at

10<sup>th</sup> and Alder, and it did not happen. Second, Keith said he would put them in the North Park Blocks [right-of-way], and it did not happen.<sup>130</sup> This was only to be a temporary measure, and the carts were to “settle permanently into the Culinary Corridor by [summer 2020].”<sup>131</sup> Marshall Runkel, chief of staff for Commissioner Eudaly, diplomatically stated the nearby businessowners “all expressed sympathy and support for the food carts” but blocked the proposal.<sup>132</sup> Jones provided more details, recounting how once the news broke that the Alder carts were investigating relocating to the North Park Blocks, a local business owners went to the Alder pod and photographed the filthy back-of-house operation complete with food spills and overflowing garbage.<sup>133, 134</sup> These photos served as dynamite NIMBY ammunition for the businessowners, some of whom may also have been motivated by the longstanding but long-disproven belief that food carts compete with brick-and-mortar restaurants.<sup>135</sup> The Friends of the Green Loop's third relocation proposal was O'Bryant Square, located just catty corner from the old Alder Pod; however it had been closed due to structural issues since 2018 and during October 2019 was slated for demolition, removing it from consideration for the time being.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Powell, “Displaced Portland Food Carts Still Looking For New Homes.”

<sup>131</sup> Singer, “A Fundraising Campaign Hopes to Raise \$300,000 to Relocate the Alder Street Food Carts.”

<sup>132</sup> Powell, “Displaced Portland Food Carts Still Looking For New Homes.”

<sup>133</sup> As alluded to earlier, City Center Parking invested in minimal infrastructure because they considered the carts a temporary source of revenue instead of a business model or cultural project worth cultivating. They only provided electricity and (inadequate) garbage collection. The unhygienic back-of-house was a function of infrastructural neglect, not the intrinsic nature of food carts, which are equal or superior to brick-and-mortar restaurants concerning food safety. For more information see: Erickson, “Street Eats, Safe Eats.”

<sup>134</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>135</sup> King, “Food Trucks Not a Threat to Restaurant Industry.”; Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia.*; Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>136</sup> Latourette Miller, “Portland Accepting Bids to Demolish O'Bryant Square, Downtown's Notorious 'Paranoid Park.'”

Option four was Ankeny Square, which was fortunately the location most of the Alder Pod vendors who planned to stick together had preferred since the initial round of site visits in late October 2018.<sup>137</sup> The park was given to the city as a gift in 1969, intended as a continuation of the Park Blocks which are today cut into the North Park Blocks and South Park Blocks.<sup>138</sup> Ankeny Square occupies roughly a quarter the volume of a full 200 x 200 foot Portland city block and features a central plaza flanked by two public bathrooms. Dividing Ankeny Square from the North Park Blocks is the bustling Burnside Street throughfare, which cuts through the city from east to west passing over the Burnside Bridge. Ankeny Square “for decades, has had a seedy reputation and attracted drug use, loitering and vandalism, as it fell into neglect and disrepair.”<sup>139</sup> For most of the 2010s, Ankeny Square languished underutilized.

In 2016, in a bid to revitalize the moribund park, the Parks department invited “social entrepreneurs” to submit a proposal for redeveloping the park which would “support activities that are responsive to critical community needs in the area, while also bringing daily positive activity and energy to Ankeny Square and the North Park Blocks.”<sup>140</sup> The winner, PSU student Jamal Gardner, leased the space for \$1 a year from Parks and established a food cart pod and bandstand performance space named Grubbin’.<sup>141</sup> It was shuttered within four months.<sup>142</sup> While Grubbin’s failure can be attributed in part to Gardner’s lack of prior business experience, the structural death knell

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<sup>137</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>138</sup> “Ankeny Square—Downtown Commercial Lease Opportunity.”

<sup>139</sup> Waldroupe, “The New Face of Ankeny Square.”

<sup>140</sup> “Ankeny Square—Downtown Commercial Lease Opportunity.”

<sup>141</sup> Waldroupe, “The New Face of Ankeny Square.”

<sup>142</sup> Kavanaugh, “Portland Effort to Save Famous Food Carts Displaced by Ritz-Carlton.”

was its inability to build a critical mass of food carts, topping out at 3-5.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, Grubbin' was physically incapable of supporting more carts due to Ankeny Square's limited size, something The Park Blocks circumvents by locating carts in the right of way. When Grubbin' closed, Ankeny Square soon reached its nadir. In 2019, the Parks department surrounded by a security rent-a-fence as the derelict bathrooms began to accrue a coat of graffiti.

This is the context Friends of the Green Loop emerged into when planning The Cart Blocks (figure 12). While the City of Portland was eager for the problem location to be taken off their hands, as previously mentioned, the new pod did not open until July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021 due to bureaucratic cross-talk, and siloed city department, and the pandemic. It did not help that Commissioner Eudaly, who had championed the Alder carts since the beginning, was not reelected in November 2020. As the city was not interested in managing a food cart pod, PBOT spent eight months trying to figure out how Parks could sell the site to PBOT so that they could permit it to Friends of the Green Loop all as one unit.<sup>144</sup> Right before the pandemic hit, Jones managed to cut through the red tape by receiving the informal go-ahead to permit the park and street on a five year contract.<sup>145</sup> The next hurdles were securing the funding for mandated park improvements, at that point \$219,000, and approval to place carts in the right of way, which according to state law "requires months of public process and input from nearby landowners" to do on a

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<sup>143</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>144</sup> Jones.

<sup>145</sup> Jones.

## Mobile Food Displacement and Formalization: A Case Study of Portland's Block 216

permanent basis.<sup>146</sup> To make matters worse, when the pandemic hit, the funding Friends of the Green Loop had secured for park improvements and startup costs fell through.<sup>147</sup> The tribulations eased in May 2021, when the Portland City Council set aside \$269,000 for The Cart Blocks as a line item in the spring budget.<sup>148</sup> The mayor's office was hoping The Cart Blocks' grand opening could happen as part of the city's post-pandemic July 24<sup>th</sup> grand reopening.<sup>149</sup> The carts lease their spots through Friends of The Green Loop which runs the pod on a not-for-profit basis and guarantees all Alder Pod veterans a spot.

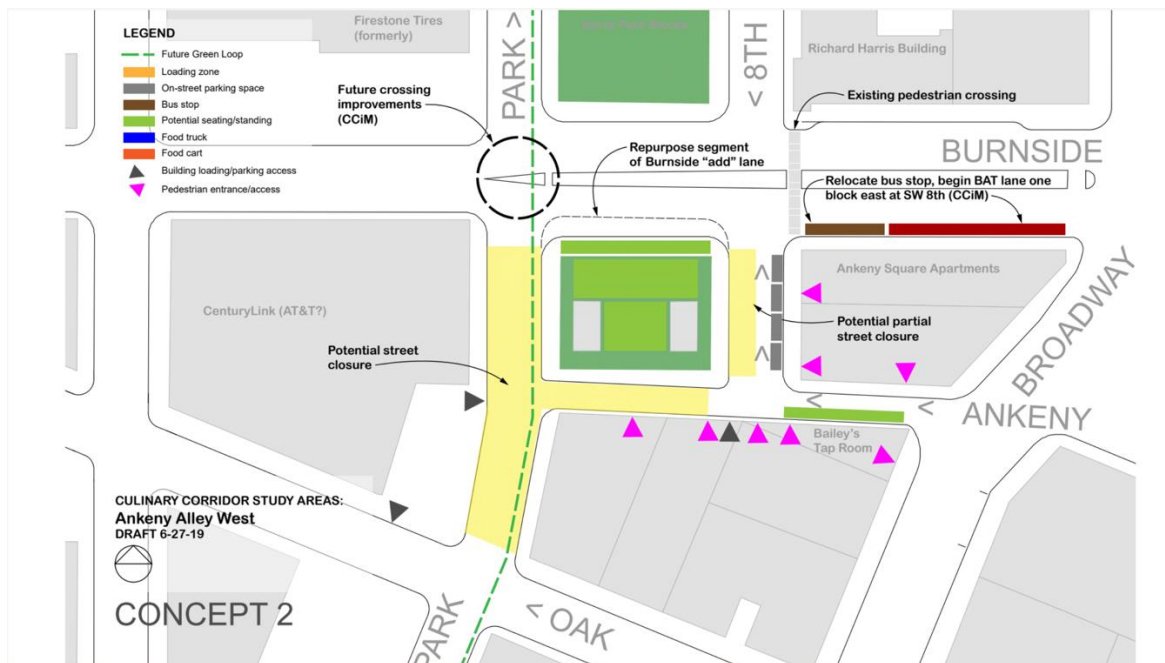


Figure 12: Early site concept for The Cart Blocks at Ankeny Square from June 2019. Jones reflected during our interview that none of the plans from that period were feasible knowing what he knows now (Image credit: Friends of the Green Loop).

<sup>146</sup> Jaquiss, “The City of Portland Wants Visitors to Come Back Downtown—but It Hasn’t Given a Food Cart Pod Permission to Operate.”

<sup>147</sup> Romero, “After Two Years, Popular Downtown Portland Food Cart Pod Set to Move to New Home This Summer.”

<sup>148</sup> Jackson-Glidden, “The City of Portland Will Set Aside \$269,000 to Relocate the Alder Street Food Carts.”

<sup>149</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.



The pod opened as scheduled during the festivities; however, the intervening two years had been difficult for many of the ex-Alder Pod food carts, including the five I spoke with. While Aimee said she had no regrets about her family's current situation at The Cart Blocks, except perhaps not shelling out for an upgraded cart, her father Juan felt that his past decade at the Alder Pod had been for nothing. They struggled to retain regular customers from before the move, and the two years they were shuttered were very difficult, stressful times financially as the cart was her family's only income stream. Henry also felt like their time at the Alder Pod was a waste as the eviction threatened their reputation, regulars, and significant capital investment. They relocated first to Salem but gave it up because of the punitive commute and pandemic. In 2021, they moved to The Cart Blocks once it opened. They finally jumped ship to a nearby food hall in November 2021 that they had been looking at since before the Alder Pod had closed, citing the climate control, steady clientele, larger cooking space, and safety as worth the extra rent. Liam used to have three locations, including a brick and mortar, and has a spouse who works in an unrelated field; thus, he was less impacted. He knew moving into the Alder Pod several months before the evictions that the writing was on the wall but considered it worth it due to the location's lucrativeness. Liam ended up weathering the eviction and pandemic rather well for these reasons, although he only operates a single cart today on the PSU campus. He expressed burnout, being sick of moving locations due to redevelopment and social unrest. Omar did not mention much about the intervening time, merely noting that his cart had been closed for two years, and it was difficult. Finally, Janice was able to find another spot in the city for about a year, thanks in part to

advocacy by her regular customers. She stayed there around a year, noting that it was nowhere near as lucrative as the Alder Pod but that “it was good enough” and holding out hope that “Keith would find us something better.”

Naturally, survivorship bias is critical to consider; the vendors I spoke to are only the success stories given that they are still around today. Exact statistics are unclear; the best resource is a frustratingly vague Friends of the Green Loop map from March 2021 that charts the operating location of 21 ex-Alder Pod food carts.<sup>150</sup> According to a spreadsheet I made in August 2023, composited from Yelp data, Google Maps data, social media posts, food cart websites, Street Food Finder, and Travel Portland's food cart map,<sup>151</sup> roughly 33 out of the 45 Alder Pod carts—or their associated brands—from the time of the July 1<sup>st</sup> eviction are still in business, though some have given up on the mobile food business model permanently. A sizable minority of the surviving businesses were well off with multiple carts or a brick and mortar circa 2019 and August 2023, providing the additional resilience that comes with diversification. Additionally, Karishma Shah notes in her analysis of brick-and-mortar culinary gentrification in Portland that many immigrant-owned, working-class restaurants have a minimally developed web presence, possibly lacking the skills or manpower to cultivate a digital web presence.<sup>152</sup> If the same pattern applies to food carts, my figure may be somewhat optimistic due to lack of information. Omar mentioned some carts that went out of business, but he did not know much about. While Henry and Alice had been at the Alder Pod for less than a year and

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<sup>150</sup> Wester et al., “Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology.”

<sup>151</sup> “Portland Food Cart Finder - Portland Food Pods.”

<sup>152</sup> Shah, “Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon.”

thus had less time to integrate themselves into pod culture than many of the veteran vendors, even Henry knew of two vendors who went out of business. According to Henry, both vendors did not react quickly enough to the eviction and had to sell their carts at a loss; one now drives an Uber.

It was not all bad. For instance, Tucker and others report that while the pandemic and resultant economic downturn were bad for everyone, food carts' time-tested ability to stay mobile, "serve takeout, pivot when necessary, and get creative in a pinch" helped them fare better than other types of dining establishments.<sup>153</sup> Just like during the 2008 recession, some brick-and-mortars downsized to food carts during the pandemic.<sup>154</sup> In the context of the Alder Pod, Tucker adds that "the reality is that those who did move are likely still open and fared relatively well through the COVID pandemic where they would not have had they stayed downtown,"<sup>155</sup> due to durable dips in downtown pedestrian traffic during the pandemic, as shops, restaurants, and offices shuttered and tourism became limited.<sup>156</sup> Still, it is difficult to imagine a hypothetical pandemic scenario where most of the Alder Pod carts would not be able to pivot to take out, relocate to an outlying pod with greater food traffic, or do both in response to drops in foot traffic. The patterns that applied to food carts in other parts of Portland also apply to them.

In the over two years since The Cart Blocks' grand opening, their position has turned from tenuous to stable and from stable to successful while weathering a good deal

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<sup>153</sup> Jackson-Glidden, "The Scrappiness of Portland's Food Carts Made Them Leaders During the Pandemic."

<sup>154</sup> Jackson-Glidden.

<sup>155</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>156</sup> "2022 Pedestrian Traffic in Downtown and Old Town Portland."

of adversity along the way. Firstly, the carts had to painstakingly accrue a new customer base to start with, and some of the vendors struggled to adjust after “expecting Alder Street all over again, with thousands of people descending on [The Cart Blocks] every day.”<sup>157</sup> Secondly, the location suffers from less-than-ideal urban design; The Cart Blocks is not visible from the highly trafficked intersection near Powell's Books a block away, and it was barely visible from Burnside Street. Moreover, Ankeny Square is

disconnected from the rest of the North Park Blocks by Burnside's busy four lanes of traffic, surrounded on three sides by buildings with few or no ground-floor windows that cut off visibility from nearly all nearby residences and businesses[,] and lies a stone's throw from many of the area's social service organizations<sup>158</sup>

contributing to a higher concentration of Homeless Portlanders in the vicinity. The absence of an activated street level means a less dynamic and welcoming streetscape while proximity to the noisy and fast-moving Burnside Street throughfare makes for a less pleasant dining experience. Thirdly, The Cart Blocks has been subject to a chronic string of vandalism, petty theft, on-premises drug dealing, and even a thwarted sexual assault attempt on a female food cart employee.<sup>159</sup> Repairs and preventative measures such as installing multiple padlocks and reinforcing propane tank enclosure ate into vendors' slim savings, made slimmer by slow sales and the two years of closure. The string of crime deterred potential customers and damaged vendor confidence. Fourthly, the July 24<sup>th</sup> grand opening came at a bad time. Food carts typically make their money between May and August, “coasting” on their gross profits for the rest of the year.<sup>160</sup> Because the

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<sup>157</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>158</sup> Kavanaugh, “Portland Effort to Save Famous Food Carts Displaced by Ritz-Carlton.”

<sup>159</sup> Kavanaugh.

<sup>160</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

vendors did not have time to accrue profits to coast with, the first winter at The Cart Blocks was a very difficult. Of the original sixteen carts, four to five left that winter,<sup>161</sup> and by June 2022 the pod was down to eight.<sup>162</sup>

Nevertheless, the Cart Blocked endured. To help carts weather the winter, Friends of the Green Loop lowered rent to the operational minimum and worked with vendors who were behind. A June 2022 article published in *The Oregonian* highlights The Cart Blocks as the neighborhood in Portland with the highest number of reported crimes; however, this designation is a result of sampling bias. Friends of the Green Loop worked with the vendors to diligently report all break-ins and vandalisms to received Prosper Portland repair grants.<sup>163</sup> Instance of petty crime have decreased with the gradual recovery of downtown Portland and due to judicious graffiti removal efforts spearheaded by Friends of the Green Loop (figure 13). According to Jones, quickly removing deters graffiti artists, who seek the notoriety that only comes from their tags' longevity.<sup>164</sup> Finally, sales figures have only gone up during the two years since The Cart Blocks opened; flying in the face of conventional seasonal sales fluctuations, vendor recently reported that his September 2023 was better than his August 2022.<sup>165</sup> Carts are reporting similar sales

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<sup>161</sup> Jones.

<sup>162</sup> Kavanaugh, "Portland Effort to Save Famous Food Carts Displaced by Ritz-Carlton."

<sup>163</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>164</sup> Jones.

<sup>165</sup> Jones.

figures across the board.



*Figure 13: Keith Jones power washing graffiti off the side of one of the Ankeny Square bathrooms the day it went up (photo credit: Friends of the Green Loop).*

Improvements continue to this day. Veteran food carts continue to report record profits, new food carts are vying for the remaining vacant spaces in the pod, and Friends of the Green Loop is managing ongoing site improvements, including laying an underground greywater management system complete with a grease interceptor.<sup>166</sup> Over two years The Cart Blocks has become a staple of the post-pandemic downtown, a triumphant canary-in-the-coalmine for the central city's mobile food recovery, a successful piece of urban acupuncture on a historically troubled piece of public land, and a hard-won victory for some of the displaced Alder Pod food carts. While many of the Alder Pod carts survived—or even thrived—the decades-long culinary culture and vibrant location that was the Alder Pod is gone forever. Now to place the displacement in a

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<sup>166</sup> Jones.

deeper context by exploring the specifics and implications what replaced the Alder Pod: Block 216. Contrary to the official statements of urban boosters and developers, Block 216 is far from a no-brainer or wholesale benefit for the city of Portland.

## Chapter Two: The History and Future of Block 216

### 2.1: *Unmet Promises*

No holistic case study treatment of the Alder Pod is possible without exploring the other side of the story, that of Block 216. In other words, one must assess what Block 216 promises to deliver in exchange for what it erased and the impact it is having instead. The most charitable and direct way to do so is to begin with the property developers' recent public statements. During a July 2023 panel discussion, Brian Owendoff, the CEO of BMO Commercial Real Estate who is one of the developers and the property manager responsible for Block 216 gave a rundown of his position on Block 216 and the benefits it will bring to Portland.<sup>167</sup> The moderator asks Owendoff to describe how the “development environment [...] from the perspective of large-scale economic development” has changed in Portland since the COVID-19 pandemic. After answering the bulk of the question, Owendoff takes the opportunity to lay out his case for what Block 216 will bring to Portland in a rehearsed manner. His points match and expand upon those in BPM's official PR Newswire from June 20th.<sup>168, 169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> See minutes 11:00 to 15:30 from Perkins, Owendoff, and Herring, Definition of Insanity Q&A Discussion.

<sup>168</sup> BPM Real Estate Group, “Block 216 to Open in Downtown Portland on August 15.”

<sup>169</sup> When Owendoff as opposed to BPM is referenced in this section, I am referring to information from the panel discussion that is not present in the PR Newswire or other materials from the real estate firm. I refer to BPM Real Estate Group instead of Owendoff's BMO Commercial Real Estate in this thesis because it appears that BPM was calling most of the shots and conducting the financing.

## Mobile Food Displacement and Formalization: A Case Study of Portland's Block 216

When summarized, BPM's case amounts to seven central points. Firstly, Block 216 will provide 4.5 blocks of additional parking garage space that harmonize well with the cyclic day-night parking requirement that arises from combining offices and a hotel in the same high-rise. Secondly, Block 216 adds 17,000 square feet of additional retail space to the Portland CBD. Thirdly, at "full [tenant] stabilization" Block 216 will generate \$10 million in new taxes for the county and city. Fourthly, the project will create 2,000 "living wage" jobs. Fifthly, BPM and Howard S. Wright—the construction firm they contracted with—kept 685 people "gainfully employed" over the course of construction. Sixthly, BPM Real Estate paid the City of Portland \$25 million in systems development charges (SDCs), which "are development-related fees, assessed to some projects [...] associated with the impact the project will have on the need for additional development of specific portions of the City's infrastructure, [such as] Portland's streets, sidewalks, transit, water service, sanitary sewer system and parks".<sup>170</sup> Finally, the landowner and other developer Walter Bowen of BPM Real Estate Group must pay \$7.76 million to the Portland Housing Bureau, which builds and manages the city's affordable housing projects, by December 31st, 2025.<sup>171</sup> While reported numbers vary from close to 7 million<sup>172</sup> to 8.1 million<sup>173</sup> owing to a yearlong period of negotiation and miscommunication between the developers and city, the final number quoted in the PR Newswire and elsewhere rests at \$7.76 million. The

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<sup>170</sup> "System Development Charges (SDCs) | Portland.Gov."

<sup>171</sup> The specifics about how BPM Real Estate Group, owned by Walter Bowen, and BMO Commercial Real Estate, owned by Brian Owendoff, are interlocked is poorly communicated in the literature. According to journalist Jonathan Bach, "Brian Owendoff [of BMO] is the owner's representative and BPM Real Estate Group is the developer." According to Keith Jones of Friends of the Green Loop, BMO is the property manager and developer while BPM is the landowner.

<sup>172</sup> Bach, Developer may pay fee rather than build affordable housing.

<sup>173</sup> Bach, "Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Affordable Housing Still an Open Question."



\$7.76 million is calculated at \$27 per square foot.<sup>174</sup> This \$7.76 million constitutes part of the \$25 million SDCs. BPM and Owendoff rhetorically frame each of the seven points as public benefits, things Block 216 is doing that will improve Portland.

Many of BPM's assertions weaken or fall apart when subjected to scrutiny or placed in a broader context. The garage is intended to maximize utility for Ritz-Carlton hotel and condo patrons along with office workers. It will likely add little real net increase to Portland's downtown parking stock. PBOT reports that while there is no chronic parking shortage in central Portland and "building permit data for mixed use buildings constructed between 2010 and 2015 shows that off-street parking has been sufficiently provided" for residents, it is increasingly difficult to find parking during peak hours in "many commercial districts, including the Central City."<sup>175</sup> To compensate, drivers are spilling into adjacent neighborhoods—causing a nuisance and potentially depriving nearby residents of curbside parking space in lieu of access to driveways or other private forms of off-street parking.<sup>176</sup> While there are five public City Center garages managed by the city of Portland, most of the downtown parking stock consists of private garages usually situated beneath apartment buildings that prioritize their residents with monthly parking passes.<sup>177</sup> Block 216 takes this a step further, meshing the daytime peaks associated with the corporate workday and the nighttime peaks associated with residential usage and hotel patrons, leaving significantly less room by correlate for

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<sup>174</sup> Wallace, "How the Opening of the Ritz-Carlton Portland Has Divided the City."

<sup>175</sup> Leclerc, "State of Parking Report."

<sup>176</sup> Leclerc.

<sup>177</sup> "Public Parking in Portland | Portland.Gov."

Portlanders visiting the downtown and workers not affiliated with Block 216's office lessors or luxury retail shops.

Contending that a new development should have more parking stock may seem unusual, considering it is now—correctly—taken as a truism that forward-thinking urban planning should disincentivize private vehicle usage.<sup>178</sup> Such a position does not conflict with transportation and urban policy writer Henry Graber's argument that well-equipped and accessible garages combined with incentives that lower the price of garage parking—effectively orienting them towards long-term car storage—while hiking the price of curb parking to incentivize only short-term usage works to get people out of the driver's seat and onto public transit or their own two feet.<sup>179</sup> One way to achieve this is to maintain well-equipped public garages followed by regulating pricing or instating quotas on private garages. Additionally, deflating the need for curbside parking allows urban planners and public opinion to entertain new ways of using curbside space, such as expanding pedestrian space, installing outdoor dining patios, encouraging pop-up shops and more.<sup>180</sup> When describing Block 216's parking as “complementary” it is critical to ask *who* it is complementary for.<sup>181</sup> Otherwise it will only become more difficult for Portlanders who do not have the privilege to live at the Ritz or work a high-power office job downtown to obtain parking there.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Grabar, *Paved Paradise*. and many, many others.

<sup>179</sup> Grabar.

<sup>180</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>181</sup> Perkins, Owendoff, and Herring, Definition of Insanity Q&A Discussion.

<sup>182</sup> The New Urbanist truism that no city needs more parking anywhere is probably a fair point meriting investigation but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

On this subject, it is well worth noting a point that Aimee raised. Near the end of our conversation, I asked her what one thing she wished to change about city's mobile food landscape if she was the "Queen of Portland." After pondering the question for a moment, she bemoaned the lack of accessible parking and requested something to alleviate it. She spoke wistfully of the easy garage access residents and office workers enjoy but how food cart owner-operators live a precarious life of searching for curbside parking near their pod each day. Janice and her husband Danny, an older couple, also spoke unhappily about parking. Even during the dead of winter, Danny would have to park about two blocks away and unload groceries by foot, which was hard on his body. Not only is lugging large quantities of food back and forth from car to cart time intensive and physically arduous, but parking curbside also risks the chance of break-ins—something that practically becomes an inevitability when made to park outside day-in-day-out, year after year. This can be a significant unexpected expense in an industry that is known for operating on razor-thin margins.<sup>183</sup>

Owendoff's second assertion is that Block 216 contributes 17,000 square feet of retail space to the Portland downtown, which the Block 216 promotional website calls into question by listing as "10,000 SF of ground floor retail space including a Food Hall".<sup>184</sup> Charitably assuming the larger figure, this is indeed a non-insignificant quantity of additional retail space, but it must be put in perspective with the 200 x 200 foot city blocks that comprise the Portland downtown.<sup>185</sup> 17,000 square feet of retail space on a

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<sup>183</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>184</sup> "Block 216 – Ritz Carlton - BPM."

<sup>185</sup> "The 200 Foot Block."

40,000 square foot parcel size is less impressive figure, considering that a sizable fraction of it will be used to accommodate The Flock—a 8,000 square foot food hall for ten vendors. Ten vendors are a far cry from what Block 216 replaced as the Alder Pod was far from “one of the largest undeveloped parcels in downtown Portland,” as Owendoff puts it.<sup>186</sup> While the number of active food carts fluctuated somewhat due to turnover, the Alder Pod was host to 55 small businesses at the time of the evictions on July 1st, 2019<sup>187</sup> which employed anywhere between 200-300 people.<sup>188</sup> While of course not accounting for Block 216's other amenities and employment opportunities, the Alder Pod was able to accommodate a far higher density of street-level businesses.

Considering the challenges Portland is facing filling retail space post-pandemic, one must ask how necessary Block 216's new retail real-estate is for the city. Like in most major US cities, many downtown retail businesses went under as a consequence of pandemic lockdowns and reduced consumer spending due to economic hardship.<sup>189</sup> Examples abound, including the Lloyd Center in the Lloyd district, near the northeastern edge of Portland's downtown. The mall has been in dire financial straits since 2021, and in September 2023, a multi-billion dollar masterplan was unveiled to transform the site into

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<sup>186</sup> Perkins, Owendoff, and Herring, Definition of Insanity Q&A Discussion.

<sup>187</sup> There is significant fluctuation in the number of food carts situated at the Alder pod. I have encountered figures ranging from 42 to 60 over the course of my research. Keith Jones from Friends of The Green Loop shed some light on this peculiarity. He said that the number fluctuates due to ownership turnovers, carts going out of business, inconsistent decisions to include the several unused “phantom carts” that were owned by real-estate speculators in the count, and in the final months, several food carts preemptively “bailed” to other pods. I will use 55 for the purposes of this thesis, because it is the number of carts Friends of The Green Loop helped relocate and because 54 and 55 came up most frequently in the research.

<sup>188</sup> Jones, “Save Portland Food Carts, Organized by Keith Jones.”

<sup>189</sup> Chapple et al., “The Death of Downtown?”

a mixed-use development with an emphasis on “mid- and high- rise apartments” providing “at the high end, potentially, as many as 5,000 units” of housing.<sup>190</sup>

The reporting on the new Lloyd Center stipulates that “[w]hat they won't build is spec offices [because] offices are down-and-out right now, and the thought of adding more is enough to raise eyebrows as Portland works through a hefty amount of vacant existing workspace.”<sup>191</sup> Though ultimately BPM reports having leased out all Block 216's street-level retail space, despite the numerous empty storefronts dotting nearby city streets, Owendoff also reports that BPM managed to lease out the retail space before the office space. This would be a highly unusual situation in a pre-pandemic world but is now commonplace in Portland and other cities like Chicago, San Francisco, and Detroit.<sup>192</sup> These cities have had their commercial CBDs hollowed out by pandemic-induced business closures and the persistence of the remote work paradigm that has retained popularity post-pandemic.<sup>193</sup> As of July 2023, the downtown office vacancy rate pushed past 26.2% which in square feet is enough to fill the city's recognizable U.S. Bancorp Tower eight times.<sup>194</sup> Some office buildings have gone under entirely, for instance the sleek 290,000 square foot Fields Office near the Willamette River which was completed in 2018 and foreclosed in July 2023. So far, Block 216 has only been able to attract two office tenants, the private equity firm Banneker Partners and the law firm Davis Wright Tremaine, which relocated from its previous office space in the Wells Fargo Center

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<sup>190</sup> Bach, “Transformative Lloyd Center Plan Could Add 5,000 Homes, Demolish Mall.”

<sup>191</sup> Bach.

<sup>192</sup> Chapple et al., “The Death of Downtown?”

<sup>193</sup> Chapple et al.

<sup>194</sup> Effinger, “Closely Watched Ritz-Carlton Tower Gets Anchor Tenant for Office Floors.”

several blocks away. Anchor tenant David Wright Tremaine “is occupying 19,100 square feet in Block 216, [under] a third of the 60,000 square feet it has in the Wells Fargo Tower.”<sup>195</sup> It remains to be seen how Block 216 will fill the remainder of its 158,000 square feet of available office space. As of December 2023, Block 216’s website advertises roughly 125,000 square feet of office space still available for lease.<sup>196</sup>

These uncertainties undermine BPM’s third point—that at full stabilization, Block 216 will generate \$10 million in city and county taxes per year. Such a figure relies on full occupancy, which is not currently the case and is not likely to be the case for at least 5-6 years, charitably using the estimates offered by Owendoff.<sup>197</sup> This figure does not contextualize itself in the revenue the Alder Pod generated for the city and its inhabitants via the small business ownership, placemaking, economic vitality, and tourism brought to the Portland city center. Direct figures about revenues generated by the Alder Pod are simply not available according to a Bureau of Development Services representative; however in 2010, the county’s food cart industry directly captured between \$11 million and \$23 million dollars, while cart operators pay between \$2 million and \$5 million in rent.<sup>198</sup> That number has inevitably only grown with the mobile food ecology; in 2022, Multnomah County boasted 1,093 licensed mobile food businesses,<sup>199</sup> up from 461 carts in the city of Portland in 2008.<sup>200</sup> Additionally, tourism is an economic boon because tourists spend large quantities of money while only being a minimal draw on city services.

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<sup>195</sup> Effinger.

<sup>196</sup> “Specs + Availabilities.”

<sup>197</sup> Perkins, Owendoff, and Herring, Definition of Insanity Q&A Discussion.

<sup>198</sup> Chastain, “Food Carts as Retail Real Estate.”

<sup>199</sup> Walker, “The Regulations That Helped Grow Portland’s Explosive Food Scene.”

<sup>200</sup> Chastain, “Food Carts as Retail Real Estate.”

While not yet at pre-pandemic levels, in 2022, tourism generated \$5.2 billion in direct spending, \$248 million in tax revenues, and 32,700 jobs for the Portland metro area<sup>201</sup> with a statewide employment multiplier of 1.52 circa 2019.<sup>202</sup> while the “Alder Pod [was notable] not only because of the high volume of customers it provided, but because it was a central meeting place for tourists from all over the world.”<sup>203</sup> The majority of the food cart owner-operators I interviewed spoke with provided stories without prompting of regular customers that were not Portland residents. One particularly poignant story from Henry was an international businessman, a longtime regular who always ate his first and final meals in the city at the same food cart.

On a related cultural note, at least two of the food cart owner-operators expressed consternation about Portland's ability to support a Ritz-Carleton for similar reasons. The tourists who visit the city are middle-income professionals interested in the city's quirky character, arts scene, and gastronomy; five-star hotels are mostly outside their tastes and beyond their means. This is the demographic Travel Portland, a respected 45 year old nonprofit that “is one of the main hubs of information for tourists to learn everything about where to go and what to do in Portland,”<sup>204</sup> has been actively marketing the city to for decades<sup>205</sup> and one it has especially enjoyed since the post-recession food cart boom placed it on the (inter)national stage.<sup>206</sup> Making certain I copied down his words verbatim, Omar emphatically opined that Portland “has nothing to offer the rich people

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<sup>201</sup> “Market Research and Statistics | Travel Portland.”

<sup>202</sup> “Oregon Travel Impacts.”

<sup>203</sup> Wester et al., “Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology.”

<sup>204</sup> Wester et al.

<sup>205</sup> Coleman, “State of the Industry - March 22, 2023.”

<sup>206</sup> Iaboni, “Video.”

moving in” because it is a city built by and for “down-to-earth, nature-loving people.” He went on to opine that the “high-rollers” Block 216 is intended for tend to gravitate towards cities like Los Vegas, Los Angeles, and New York where paying “\$1,350 to \$1,900 per square foot for 138 condos, prices never before seen in Portland,” is more customary.<sup>207</sup> Another cart owner who had been at the Alder Pod for nearly two decades was quoted by *The Oregonian* expressing related sentiments. He speculated,

I think that's something that no one in Portland is going to use and this is something that thousands of people a day in Portland use, [...] so in terms of servicing the local community, I don't think it's really even in the same ballpark.<sup>208</sup>

BPM's fourth claim, that at full stabilization the project will create 2,000 “living-wage” jobs, is inaccurate. According to MIT's living wage calculator, the living wage for one adult living in Multnomah County—which contains Portland and its commuter suburbs—in 2023 is \$21.85 an hour, assuming full-time employment.<sup>209</sup> Most other common living arrangements yield even higher figures, for instance \$28.09 each for two working adults with two children. While Ritz-Carlton and its parent company Marriott are not transparent with wage information, one can with reasonable confidence extrapolate from May 2022 Bureau of Labor Statistics figures for the Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro commuter area, which provides mean and median incomes for a wide array of occupational sectors.<sup>210</sup> BPM reports that “the tower will employ 250 Ritz-Carlton hotel staff” alone, meaning hospitality service workers constitute a significant share of Block

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<sup>207</sup> Manning and Njus, “Betting on the Ritz.”

<sup>208</sup> Powell, “Forced To Move, Portland's Alder Street Food Carts Are Planning For The Future.”

<sup>209</sup> “Living Wage Calculator.”

<sup>210</sup> “May 2022 Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates - Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA.”



216's job creation.<sup>211</sup> Employees in the ground level retail space add dozens more jobs to the tally. An incomplete snapshot of hospitality and retail service work from the aforementioned Bureau of Labor Statistics figures reveals that in Portland concierges make median/mean hourly salaries of \$16.97/\$17.32; hotel, motel, and resort desk clerks make median/mean hourly salaries of \$16.76/\$16.84; maids and housekeeping cleaners make median/mean hourly salaries of \$16.79/\$17.60; and retail salespersons make median/mean hourly salaries of \$16.51/\$19.03.<sup>212</sup> Even after accounting for the somewhat higher salaries offered for positions at luxury locales, these service jobs do not provide a "living wage" by MIT's metric, especially when compared to the by-definition self-supporting owner-operator small businesses that occupied 10<sup>th</sup> and Alder before July 2019. In addition, mobile food jobs give their practitioners a highly valued opportunity for professional self-actualization and self-determination, albeit at the whims of the market.<sup>213</sup> My interview participants overwhelmingly expressed this sentiment, and it is reported extensively in the literature on mobile food in Portland and elsewhere.<sup>214</sup>

As with all businesses, those in Block 216 will employ more than just service workers. The smaller number of management and administrative workers as well as in-house skilled laborers, like electricians, are far more likely to receive living wages than the pink-collar service jobs listed in the previous paragraph. Meanwhile, the professional class 'knowledge workers' occupying the tower's Class A office space make well into the

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<sup>211</sup> Bach, "Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Reveals 2023 Opening Date."

<sup>212</sup> "May 2022 Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates - Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA."

<sup>213</sup> Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

<sup>214</sup> Caramaschi, "Counteracting Food Deserts. The Potential for Mobile Food Vending in Regenerating Contemporary Cities."; Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia*.; Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

six figures. Still, current anchor tenants like Davis Wright Tremaine are not creating jobs in this scenario; they are merely shifting existing jobs from one downtown building to another.<sup>215</sup> Once again, it remains to be seen when, how, and even if Block 216's copious office space will be filled.

In contrast to the tangled snarl that is BPM's claims about employment and job creation its fifth claim is more straightforward. It maintains that and the various contractors and subcontractors it hired to construct Block 216 "gainfully employed" 685 people through the pandemic. Due to the convoluted nature of labor contracting and subcontracting and tracking hiring practices over the span of four years, verifying this figure is well beyond the scope of what is possible in an undergraduate thesis. That said, the aforementioned Bureau of Labor Statistics dataset reports median and mean wages for the construction sector that are almost always comfortably above the contemporary living wage threshold for the Portland commuter area.<sup>216</sup>

The sixth point, that BPM Real Estate paid the City of Portland \$25 million in systems development charges (SDCs), is widely reported in the journalistic coverage of Block 216 from 2019<sup>217</sup> until 2023, although the true genesis of this figure is stubbornly opaque.<sup>218</sup> The reason BPM frequently emphasizes this point is unclear. SDCs are a long-established part of building in Oregon, and "exactions have long been viewed as the legitimate exercise of a local government's police power" which has been common since

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<sup>215</sup> Effinger, "Closely Watched Ritz-Carlton Tower Gets Anchor Tenant for Office Floors."

<sup>216</sup> "May 2022 Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates - Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA."

<sup>217</sup> Bell, "Groundbreaking Marks Start of \$600M Ritz-Carlton Project."

<sup>218</sup> BPM Real Estate Group, "Block 216 to Open in Downtown Portland on August 15."

the Great Depression.<sup>219</sup> The purpose of SDCs is to ensure that the costs associated with increasing demands on public infrastructure (such as roads, parks, water, and sewer systems, etc.) due to new development are borne by the developers and the new residents or businesses, rather than being entirely shouldered by the existing community. Replacing a food cart pod with a 35 story mixed-use tower is a significant change to the Portland downtown which necessitates concomitant improvements to the city's infrastructure and amenities.

While some preliminary rates for various systems improvements based on metrics like square footage, land use, and water usage are listed on the city website, SDC calculations are opaque and usually involve a measure of dialogue between the Bureau of Development Services and the property developers. Additionally, BPM does not appear to be a publicly traded company with SEC filings, so independently trawling for financial information is beyond the ambit of this thesis. Still, public documents reveal that in April 2021—well into the construction process—the City of Portland's Bureau of Revenue deferred nearly \$7 million of the \$25 million SDCs for a period of one year.<sup>220</sup> According to the document, this \$7 million lien was spread between PBOT, Portland Parks & Recreation (Parks), and Portland Bureau of Environmental Services (BES). There is legal infrastructure for the deferral in the city code that, according to an email conversation with a representative from Parks, “is a regular process for payments of SDCs in building

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<sup>219</sup> Elise Kennedy et al., “Oregon System Development Charges Study.”

<sup>220</sup> “Assess Property for System Development Charge Contracts, Private Plumbing Loan Contracts and Safety Net Loan Deferral Contracts (Ordinance; Zo846, Ko188, To205, Wo074, Zi210, Ko189, To206, Zo847, Wo075, Po167, Po168).”

permits.”<sup>221</sup> Another representative from the Bureau of Revenue shared that all the SDCs were paid off by March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022—“approximately 1 month before the deferral end date,” although the Parks representative contradictorily stated the nearly \$2.2 million in SDCs owed to Parks “were [sic] paid off in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 22-23 fiscal year.”<sup>222</sup> Despite the apparent normalcy of the deferral process, is it unusual that a large firm like BPM, which regularly trades in tens or even hundreds of millions in real estate, would defer such a comparatively small fee considering the added interest and one-time processing charge for any deferred SDCs. Literature suggests that deferrals generally may open the city up to the risk of nonpayment, and this deferral may be an indication of financial trouble for Block 216—as this thesis will discuss with more depth in chapter 2.4.<sup>223</sup>

The City of Portland does offer partial or full SDCs exemptions for new development that meets affordable housing standards; however, Block 216 does not meet these standards.<sup>224</sup> In fact, BPM's seventh point, which details the \$7.76 million payment to the Portland Housing Bureau, is a penalty in lieu of building mandated affordable housing. This money will go towards direct financing as well as indirect subsidies in the form of gap funding to construct and maintain affordable housing. Instituted in 2017 as a

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<sup>221</sup> “17.13.090 Payment.”

<sup>222</sup> This means that the Parks lien was seemingly paid past the April 2022, 12-month deadline. The Portland City Council did make changes to the code in April 2023 allowing for projects that provided housing to secure 24-month deferrals (“City Council Allows Deferral of System Development Charge Payments for New Housing Units | Portland.Gov.”); however, this was well after the May 2022 deadline, and according to a representative from Parks, the Bureau of Revenue “wouldn't have been able to transfer deferral types once the contract was signed.” Beyond this, it is unclear how the deferral timeline played out and what the consequences were (if any) for BPM. The most straightforward explanation is that the Parks representative was simply misinformed, but this inconsistency is not something to smooth over so readily considering the millions of dollars it is meant to account. Future sleuthing is suggested.

<sup>223</sup> Elise Kennedy et al., “Oregon System Development Charges Study.”

<sup>224</sup> “Chapter 30.01 Affordable Housing Preservation and Portland Renter Protections | Portland.Gov.”

response to the formal housing state of emergency Portland declared in 2015, the Inclusionary Housing policy requires that all new apartment buildings adopt one of several measures to encourage mixed-income housing. The policy included five different options for developers, allowing them to set aside certain percentages of units at certain percentages of median family income (MFI), or barring that, build or designate new affordable housing offsite.<sup>225</sup> One of the options was for developers to pay a fee to the Housing Bureau in lieu of providing affordable housing units; however, BPM told the city they intended to provide the affordable units and then reneged, making the \$7.76 million sum a penalty and not a fee.<sup>226</sup> Meanwhile the relatively modest commitment that BPM made in 2020 but reneged on would have allotted 20 percent of Block 216's units for affordable housing at 80% MFI (or 28 out of 138 units).<sup>227</sup>

During a February 2023 interview with *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, Jonathan Bach, a *Portland Business Journal* investigative journalist on the housing and inclusionary zoning beat who has been closely following Block 216 since the beginning, sheds light on the lengthy and tumultuous negotiations between BPM and the City of Portland. Bach, states that

[t]here's been back and forth for really close to more than a year now, I would say, on will they or won't they put those affordable units in the Ritz-Carlton Tower. [...] I spoke with Walter Bowen, the CEO of BPM Real Estate Group, which is the developer last year, and he was noncommittal in that interview [...] he sort of hadn't answered the question of if they're going to pay this fee or if they were going to actually put the affordable housing units inside. He was, however, super frustrated with the prospect of having, it seemed, to do either.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> "Inclusionary Housing | Portland.Gov."

<sup>226</sup> The distinction between penalty and fee is only of normative significance; the payment in either case would have been \$7.76 million.

<sup>227</sup> Slothower, "Luxurious Building Set to Be More Inclusive."

<sup>228</sup> Bach, Developer may pay fee rather than build affordable housing.

The \$7.76 million penalty BPM will pay will go “into a fund intended to help pay for other affordable housing in the city” by December 2025.<sup>229</sup> The city can likely only “start to enforce the noncompliance penalty [...] once all of the anticipated inclusionary housing units are sold and the affordability requirements haven’t been met,” which is tied to over 80% of the condos selling first.<sup>230</sup> In addition, “the city will charge an interest rate [on the fine] of 0.833% per month, which will begin to accrue if the penalty isn’t paid by the time all the residential units are sold—or December 31, 2025, whichever comes first.”<sup>231</sup> According to email correspondence with the Development Incentives Manager from the Portland Housing Bureau, the fee in lieu would have been the same price as the penalty, except for the latter’s interest rate. Figures on the number of condos sold differ conspicuously. In June 2023, a BPM spokesperson reported that about 30% of the condos were sold which was “right on schedule.”<sup>232</sup> Meanwhile, according to the Ritz-Carlton’s listing broker quoted in September 2023, the figure sits at just 15%.<sup>233</sup> On the face of it, a cynical read might suggest purposeful obfuscation on the part of Ritz-Carlton representatives to hide that Block 216’s condos are not selling as well as expected. A more even read might maintain that these inconsistencies clearly deserve more scrutiny but do not necessarily point to anything duplicitous. When asked about the discrepancy during an email correspondence, Jonathan Bach wrote that he was “not sure why they’re

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<sup>229</sup> Bach, “Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Reveals 2023 Opening Date.”

<sup>230</sup> Bach, Developer may pay fee rather than build affordable housing.

<sup>231</sup> Wallace, “How the Opening of the Ritz-Carlton Portland Has Divided the City.”

<sup>232</sup> Bach, “Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Reveals 2023 Opening Date.”

<sup>233</sup> Wallace, “How the Opening of the Ritz-Carlton Portland Has Divided the City.”

different,” suggesting that lost-in-translation semantics about different levels of deal closure might be to blame.

Finally, it is unclear how much the \$7.76 million injection into the Portland Housing Bureau will help actually create affordable housing once it is acquired, likely over a year after Block 216 is fully opened, considering that affordable housing is “really complicated and super expensive to build.”<sup>234</sup> While perhaps substantial enough to function as a penalty, the \$7.76 million dollars does not amount to much when it comes to actually building affordable housing. According to my email correspondence with Jonathan Bach, “a single affordable housing development typically costs tens of millions—if not more” but that some argue every little bit helps. The Development Incentives Manager from Portland Housing Bureau further contextualized this, clarifying that the bureau provides gap funding to make affordable housing lucrative for private developers who proposed projects that meet their guidelines and “when using a rough average of a PHB allocation of \$150K per unit, that could result in about 52 units.”

Still, building stand-alone affordable housing elsewhere in the city defeats the other primary purpose of the Inclusionary Housing policy—to encourage heterogeneous income levels within Portland's downtown core, creating social benefits and promoting equity. While Block 216 is the only project to renege on previously announced affordable housing commitments and thus incur a penalty, 36 “other, smaller projects volunteered to opt into the fee-in-lieu system to take advantage of various incentives like density bonuses” overall generating a paltry \$5.5 million, some of which has not yet been

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<sup>234</sup> Bach, Developer may pay fee rather than build affordable housing.

collected as of February 2023.<sup>235</sup> This figure is in addition to one larger project, the Holden of Pearl senior living apartments from Alliance Residential Co., which paid a \$4.2 million fee in lieu.<sup>236</sup>

In sum, many of the benefits that Block 216's developers say it will bring Portland are qualified, contested, deceptively contextualized, or are otherwise misleading. While efficiently devised for Block 216 residents and office workers, the building's garage will do little to augment street parking with garage space—one of the intermediate steps in limiting the presence of private automobiles in the public realm. The 17,000 feet of retail space Block 216 adds is less impressive when considering the vibrant retail space it removed—the Alder food cart pod—and its short to medium term utility for Portland's post-pandemic downtown is up to debate. BPM's estimate that Block 216 will provide \$10 million in tax revenue at full stabilization is predicated on the unlikely prospect of the building reaching full capacity, something experts were "skeptical" of even pre-pandemic due to the unprecedented price point.<sup>237</sup> The figure also neglects the indirect role the Alder Pod had in attracting both tourists and locals to the Portland downtown in the first place. The argument that the building will create 2,000 living wage jobs is misleading as early anchor tenants are merely shifting across town and most of the supporting service jobs are unlikely to fetch anything near a living wage. Lastly, of the \$25 million in SDCs owed by BPM for standard infrastructure and amenities upgrades as per city and Oregon state law, nearly \$7 million were deferred for a year, and another \$7.76 million is in fact

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<sup>235</sup> Bach, "Pearl District Tower Developer Paid \$4.2M to Avoid Affordability Requirement."

<sup>236</sup> Bach.

<sup>237</sup> Manning and Njus, "Betting on the Ritz."



from a penalty paid in lieu of including affordable housing in the development. But these ripostes are only judging Block 216 on its own terms; there are still several other points worth scrutinizing it on, namely (mis)use of federal Opportunity Zones aided by the state government and continual signs of financial trouble.

## *2.2: The Supply-Side Sleight of Opportunity Zones*

Before explaining how Block 216 took advantage of Opportunity Zones, it is necessary to explain what Opportunity Zones (OZs) are, their efficacy, and how much of downtown Portland came to be classified under them. In brief, OZs are a federal government economic development program designed to incentivize long-term private investment in low-income or economically distressed communities in lieu of direct public investment. The program was established as part of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act passed by Congress and signed into law by former President Donald Trump in December 2017. Still, OZs did not sprout from nowhere. They are part of a neoliberal urban governance playbook that stretches back over 40 years—in essence, incentivizing private investment through deregulation and tax breaks. British Enterprise Zones (EnZ) were the ancestor of OZs. With theoretical roots in 1970s speculative scholarship by progressive British geographer Sir Peter Hall of University College London—who was inspired by prosperous global “freeports” like Hong Kong and Singapore—EnZs were later branded as such and implemented by Thatcher cabinet minister Geoffrey Howe in 1980.<sup>238</sup>

Across the pond, EnZs were picked up by New York Republican congressman Jack Kemp. Described as a “bleeding-heart conservative” hailing from a middle-class Angeleno

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<sup>238</sup> Weaver, “The False Promise of Opportunity Zones.”

family, Kemp represented a GOP in the throes of the conservative uprising, one that was determined to win over urban voters by any means necessary.<sup>239</sup> Kemp introduced the Urban Jobs and Enterprise Zone Act in spring 1980 with Robert Garcia (D-NY). Despite enjoying backing in the White House, EnZs floundered federally during the 1980s due to stiff pushback from congressional democrats in key positions. Still, they were adopted piecemeal on the state level, and “by the end of the decade over forty states had their own enterprise zone programs.”<sup>240</sup> Even Prosper Portland, operates their own EnZ program established in 2017 that allows

qualified firms that will be making a substantial new capital investment a waiver of 100 percent of the amount of real property taxes attributable to the new investment for a five-year period after completion, [essentially] offering local property tax exemptions to invest in new construction and personal property to create quality jobs.<sup>241</sup>

For their part, BPM was able to secure a 5-6 year tax abatement through Prosper Portland.<sup>242</sup> Following in lockstep with the newborn neoliberal consensus, the Clinton administration rebranded EnZs as Empowerment Zones (EmZ), passing the Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities Act of 1993. The acts only “significant policy change” was awarding each designated city a \$100 million federal grant.<sup>243</sup>

The EmZ program ended in 2011 but was extended several times through the end of 2016. Meanwhile, EnZs have largely continued to exist on the state level since they were first implemented over forty years ago. Meanwhile in 2015 a brief by the bipartisan think tank Economic Innovation Group provided the backbone of what would become the

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<sup>239</sup> Byrnes, “The Quarterback Who Wrote the Playbook on Fighting Urban Poverty.”

<sup>240</sup> Weaver, “The False Promise of Opportunity Zones.”

<sup>241</sup> Norwood, “Portland Enterprise Zone.”

<sup>242</sup> Perkins, Owendoff, and Herring, Definition of Insanity Q&A Discussion.

<sup>243</sup> Weaver, “Elite Empowerment.”

failed Investing in Opportunity Act in 2016 and eventually the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act the following year. The original brief was penned by Kevin Hassett—Trump's chief economic advisor—and Jared Bernstein—who held the same position for then-Vice President Joe Biden. Similarly, the initial version of the act was championed by senators Tim Scott (R-SC) and Cory Booker (D-NJ). The overwhelming similarities between OZs and prior instances of supply-side urban development policy, along with their shared histories, demonstrate nothing if not the embeddedness of the neoliberal economic consensus in American partisan politics.

More important than tracing the political history of OZs is identifying that, if the goal is to uplift struggling census tracts, OZs and their predecessors simply do not work.

Decades of scholarship assessing EnZs and EmZs suggests that they are

either ineffective in stimulating new economic activity, or, in the rarer cases where new activity can be attributed to zone incentives (as opposed to activity that was likely to have occurred in any case), extraordinarily expensive [with] 'little or no positive impact' on economic growth, [and] ultimately 'none of the [EmZ] programs fundamentally transformed distressed urban neighborhoods.'<sup>244</sup>

OZs and their predecessors do not work because their "singular focus" on manipulating supply-side incentives by reducing or eliminating capital gains taxes<sup>245</sup> for developers "structurally favors projects that generate high returns, rather than the greatest social impacts"<sup>246</sup> under the mistaken, facile "principle that people are poor because they're not

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<sup>244</sup> Weaver, "The False Promise of Opportunity Zones."

<sup>245</sup> Capital gains taxes are taxes levied on the profits (capital gains) earned from the sale or disposition of certain assets, such as investments, real estate, or other valuable possessions. The tax is calculated based on the difference between the selling price of the asset and its original purchase price. When the selling price is higher than the purchase price, a "capital gain" is realized. OZs allow developers to defer capital gains taxes if they are reinvested within OZs. If the investment is held for ten years, all capital gains on the new investment are waived.

<sup>246</sup> Ross, "New Research Adds to Evidence That Opportunity Zone Tax Breaks Are Costly and Ineffective."

located near capital” instead of the myriad structural pressures that create and maintain poverty such as class divisions, dispossessed populations, racial capitalism, and the reserve army of labor, which are not aberrations to the otherwise smooth functioning of the capitalist market economy but inimical to its function.<sup>247</sup> What is more, OZs are projected to cost the federal purse \$103 billion in lost tax revenue through the program's 2026 budget window.<sup>248</sup>

In sum, Dr. Timothy Weaver, assistant professor of urban politics at the University of Albany, identifies the “six key problems” with OZs and their predecessors. Namely, they (1) reward the wealthy for making investments they would have made anyway; (2) amount to shuffling the deck, meaning shifting nearby planned investments into the designated region or slightly expanding the region to accommodate the investment; (3) pay little attention to who exactly is benefitting, for instance encouraging development like luxury or market-rate housing in distressed neighborhoods; (4) risk making things worse for the poor by triggering gentrification; (5) any rare benefits may not be justified by the cost in tax revenue that could have been directly spent on improvements; and (6) are undemocratic, failing “to give residents any say as to what kinds of investments they want or need”.<sup>249</sup>

The impact of OZs in Oregon has been no exception. Like other states, Oregon was given 90 days after the passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act to select low-income census tracts to designate as federal OZs, which made for an “extraordinarily quick’ pace for

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<sup>247</sup> Bell, “Why Portland's Opportunity Zones Might Be Missing the Mark.”

<sup>248</sup> Ross, “New Research Adds to Evidence That Opportunity Zone Tax Breaks Are Costly and Ineffective.”

<sup>249</sup> Weaver, “The False Promise of Opportunity Zones.”

Mobile Food Displacement and Formalization: A Case Study of Portland's Block 216

decisionmaking” and designations being made “without really understanding what the brand-new program was.”<sup>250</sup> The federal program stipulated that states could nominate up to 25% of eligible census tracts, tracts with poverty rates greater than 20 percent or family incomes that are no more than 80 percent of the area median.<sup>251</sup> The state government ended up establishing 86 OZs, 31% in rural areas, 38% percent in urban areas, and the final 31% in the Portland metropolitan region. This drew a wave of criticism as over 40 percent of commercial real estate investment during the first three years of the program fell within areas now zoned as OZs, “a far higher percentage than in any other major U.S. city.”<sup>252</sup> This includes portions of downtown Portland where Block 216 is located, the Pearl District and the wealthier parts of the Portland Eastside within the urban core (see figure 1).<sup>253</sup> The policy also received a deal of pushback from activists, affordable housing advocates, and local governments, some of whom successfully “rallied to keep the OZ designation from their census tracts because their ‘neighborhood is “already threatened by outside investment that works against the interests of lower-income residents and people of color,” and that OZs would ‘make gentrification even more profitable.”<sup>254</sup>

In the case of Block 216, many of Weaver’s summations—especially that that OZs reward the wealthy for making investments they were already going to make—hold true.

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<sup>250</sup> Matonte, Parker, and Clark, “The Failure of Opportunity Zones in Oregon.”

<sup>251</sup> Leatherby and Buhayar, “Welcome to Tax Breaklandia.”

<sup>252</sup> Leatherby and Buhayar.

<sup>253</sup> Slothower, “Opportunity Zone Funds’ Role Is Opaque.”

<sup>254</sup> Matonte, Parker, and Clark, “The Failure of Opportunity Zones in Oregon.”

Downtown Development Group (DDG), the landowner who owned<sup>255</sup> the 10<sup>th</sup> and Alder parking lot where the Alder Pod was situated, had plans to gradually redevelop their downtown landholdings near the Tom McCall waterfront since February 2016 in an ambitious project called the Ankeny Blocks.<sup>256</sup> Similarly, DDG listed Block 216 as “available” for development on the development opportunities page of their website since at least February 2015.<sup>257</sup> While DDG reportedly did not know about the OZ incentives until after the designations,<sup>258</sup> “several studies have demonstrated that quite a few of the projects in Oregon were placed with the intention only to help development projects underway.”<sup>259</sup> For instance, even in 2018 one “project in downtown Portland already had a certificate of occupancy<sup>260</sup> ready before the OZ legislation, yet legally could use the OZ designation to create a windfall for the development’s investors.”<sup>261</sup> Although local developers and financiers were not aware of OZs when they were apportioned on the state level—and thus did not mobilize to tip the scales in their favor—these elites were accidentally poised to take advantage of them while continuing business as usual.

These unearned benefits for urban landowners, developers, and their investors persist to today. Currently “all but one of [DDG’s] development sites [are] in areas eligible for the breaks,” and the landowners have recognized that the OZ benefits are significant

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<sup>255</sup> DDG sold the land to BPM for \$30 million in May 2021. For more information, see Bach, “Walter Bowen-Tied Company Buys Block 216 Property for \$30 Million.”

<sup>256</sup> Korfhage, “Portland’s Oldest Food Cart Pod May Soon Be Replaced by Giant Apartment Building.”

<sup>257</sup> See the February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015 Wayback Machine snapshot of “Development Opportunities | Downtown Development Group.”

<sup>258</sup> Leatherby and Buhayar, “Welcome to Tax Breaklandia.”

<sup>259</sup> Matonte, Parker, and Clark, “The Failure of Opportunity Zones in Oregon.”

<sup>260</sup> A certificate of occupancy is a document that certifies a building’s compliance with applicable building codes and other laws, therefore certifying its suitability for occupancy. In this case, a certificate of occupancy suggests that the project was essentially complete.

<sup>261</sup> Leatherby and Buhayar, “Welcome to Tax Breaklandia.”

boons for their redevelopment plans.<sup>262</sup> OZ benefits were consciously factored into the Block 216 development process. For instance, according to Jones, the swift and draconian food cart eviction schedule during the prelude to the Block 216 groundbreaking was so DDG and BPM could reap an unspecified temporal reward associated with the OZ incentives.<sup>263</sup> Firms like BPM, DDG, Sturgeon Development Partners, and Mosaic Real Estate Investors, are profiting from building high-rises like Block 216, Broadway Tower, and the new Eleven West which fall within the OZ districts and contain high-end market-rate real-estate, premium office space, fine dining, luxury retail, and other amenities explicitly geared toward affluent Portlanders and tourists.<sup>264</sup>

Standing in contrast to the veritable bonanza for urban developers, Manonte et al. emphasize the under-discussed role of OZ in spurring rural development. Namely, they argue OZs have failed to effectively incentivize investment in more socially beneficial projects, like workforce housing in blighted rural communities. Even with OZ benefits, developers could only implement housing and profit “if municipalities were willing to waive site development fees [which vary but] tend to range from \$10,000 to \$50,000 or more for a single-family residential unit.” Manonte et al. conclude in their 2022 analysis of Oregon’s OZ implementation that it “would have been more successful if public sector partners [i.e., county-level elected officials and city managers] were better positioned to provide accurate information and technical assistance” and that “the number of projects is so tiny that it is reasonable to say that the promise of the [OZ] legislation is failing to

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<sup>262</sup> Leatherby and Buhayar.

<sup>263</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>264</sup> “A Shot in the Arm for Urban Development.”

deliver on its potential.”<sup>265</sup> Manonte et al. suggest that stronger developer incentives in the forms of waived fees and tax benefits is key, but a truly better method for urban and rural revitalization would move away from neoliberal supply-side models altogether and direct federal and state money towards “direct state investment in social infrastructure [...] from affordable housing, schools, and good-paying jobs to medical clinics, playgrounds and sports facilities, libraries, and affordable, high-quality public transit.”<sup>266</sup> As New Deal-era rural electrification schemes first proved, healing the divide between town and country cannot be left to the free market because private firms find it unprofitable to invest in rural areas.

It is true that poor state-level communication alongside the “rushed and imperfect process for designating zones” (in part circumscribed by the federal government’s 30-day implementation period) hampered the effective rollout of OZs in Oregon. Nevertheless, the program’s failure to benefit Oregonians remains more a function of design than implementation. As this thesis had duly demonstrated, OZs and their supply-side predecessors are better at facilitating the redistribution of wealth upwards than fundamentally revitalizing impoverished neighborhoods. In Oregon’s case especially, the most dramatic impact was seen in urban centers where OZ tax incentives have primarily subsidized luxury real estate, including projects that were planned prior to December 2017—and in at least one case already constructed. DDG and BPM with the \$600 million dollar Block 216 project have been some of the largest beneficiaries. Still despite these

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<sup>265</sup> Matonte, Parker, and Clark, “The Failure of Opportunity Zones in Oregon.”

<sup>266</sup> Weaver, “The False Promise of Opportunity Zones.”



benefits, there is ample reason to suspect that Block 216's developers are in less than ideal financial straits.

### 2.3: *Gentrification Overleveraged*

Concerns about Block 216 have emerged almost since the beginning. Just one month after the building broke ground in July 2019, *The Oregonian* offered a doubtful picture of the Ritz-Carleton hotel and condominium's prospects.<sup>267</sup> While for decades city officials have said Portland needs new hotel stock to attract lucrative national conventions and sporting events, analysts concluded even pre-pandemic that the gap in demand was well on its way to being filled—or even that the past lack had turned into a present glut. Figures from August 2018 state that “seven planned projects [...] would add another 2,244 rooms. In all, that would mean an increase of nearly 40 percent since July 2017” and “Portland hotels are already seeing signs of oversupply.”<sup>268</sup> *The Oregonian* piece updates and elaborates on this dilemma, stating “hotel rates have held steady for several years, and occupancy remains high. But operators remain concerned about the flood of hotel rooms, and operators have seen declines in per-room revenue,” suggesting a bubble liable to burst with the added capacity.<sup>269</sup> Additionally, Portland does not currently have a steady enough stream of business travelers to fill rooms outside of peak times like conventions or the holiday season. It seems unlikely that the average convention traveler or sports fan would have use for the Ritz-Carleton, considering it represents an entirely

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<sup>267</sup> Manning and Njus, “Betting on the Ritz.”

<sup>268</sup> Brown, “Portland Is In the Midst of a Hotel-Building Spree. Can Visitors Keep Up?”

<sup>269</sup> Manning and Njus, “Betting on the Ritz.”

new market share that expects to charge prices that start at \$575 per night,<sup>270</sup> which is roughly twice the price that Portland's current crop of luxury hotels charge, none of which approach the brand pedigree or market segment that the Ritz-Carlton caters to.<sup>271</sup>

Condos "are crucial to the Ritz-Carlton tower's success" due to their ability to turn a profit more quickly than rented office and retail space, but Portland's downtown condo market has "gone from red hot to tepid" since 2016.<sup>272</sup> *The Oregonian* piece and other contemporaneous journalism reports that "after becoming a mainstay of Portland's real estate scene, the condo boom quietly fizzled in 2017," despite the then-strong economy.<sup>273</sup> Even young professionals are priced out of the condo market, to say nothing of working class individuals and families. The figure has not improved in the years since. The pandemic has been a clear contributor as has the city's continued flagrant, inhumane mismanagement of the homelessness crisis and opioid crisis in the city center—themselves locked in a vicious spiral with Portland's housing state of emergency, which has entered its eighth year. In 2022 the average condo sales price was "was \$593,928, down 12% from the year before and the seventh consecutive year prices have declined."<sup>274</sup> In April 2023, the 7-day average price per square foot in Portland's condo market was \$398,

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<sup>270</sup> KGW Staff, "Portland Ritz-Carlton Finally Locks in Opening Date."

<sup>271</sup> Manning and Njus, "Betting on the Ritz."

<sup>272</sup> Manning, "Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Nears Completion with Few Apparent Hiccups, Defying Odds."

<sup>273</sup> Manning and Njus, "Betting on the Ritz."

<sup>274</sup> Manning, "Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Nears Completion with Few Apparent Hiccups, Defying Odds."

only eight dollars more than at the same point in time five years ago (figure 14).<sup>275</sup>

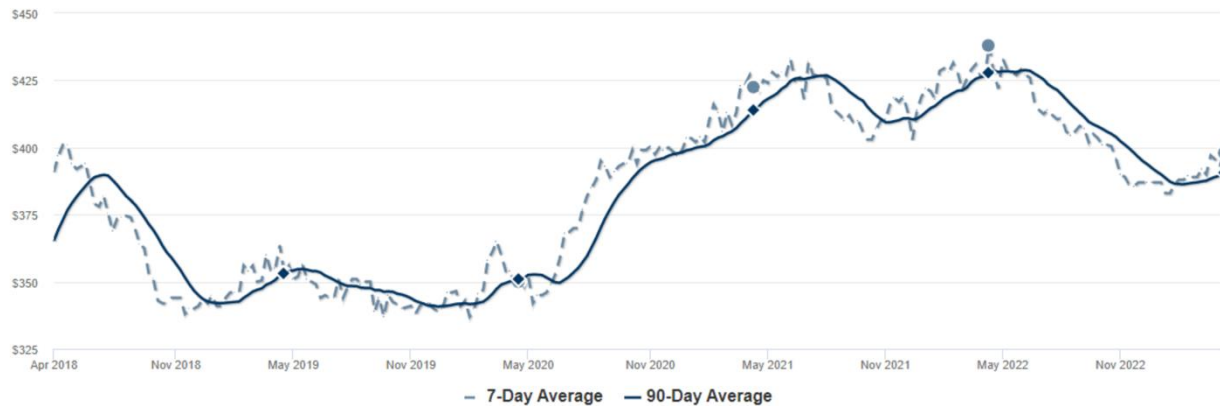


Figure 14. Condo price averages in Portland between April 2018 and April 2023 (taken from FitzMaurice, "Portland Downtown Condos VS. Rest of Condos in the Metro, 2023 Report." with data sourced from Fidelity National Title).

These figures stand in stark contrast from the \$1,914.59 per square foot mean price tags attached to the 138 Ritz-Carleton residences, with list prices beginning at \$1.7 million, coasting to a median of \$3.02 million,<sup>276</sup> and topping out at \$7.85 million for the penthouse.<sup>277</sup> By comparison, some of the most exclusive penthouses in the best buildings in downtown Portland have sold for \$1,200 to \$1,300 per square foot. Kate Williams, the owner and principal broker of Rose City Realty Group, remarked in February 2022 in reference to the project that "[s]omeone isn't reading the room in the downtown Portland crisis with respect to this pricing [...] condominiums in Portland are trading right now, but only if they are priced in a compelling way."<sup>278</sup> In essence, the Ritz-Carleton's never seen before prices in a buyer's market for the wealthy that is still unaffordable for everyone else wholly fit Williams' appraisal for properties that would be difficult to sell.

<sup>275</sup> FitzMaurice, "Portland Downtown Condos VS. Rest of Condos in the Metro, 2023 Report."

<sup>276</sup> "Ritz-Carlton Residences of Portland, OR | 10th Avenue & Alder Street."

<sup>277</sup> Bach, "Downtown Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Condo Goes for Nearly \$8M."

<sup>278</sup> Bach, "Online Listings Give Peek inside Condos at Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower."

It ultimately remains dubious if the market existed for the luxury condos in 2019, let alone in 2023. While BPM commissioned a market study from real estate consulting firm RCLCO in 2019 about the viability of the Block 216 project,

The study makes no mention of slowing sales or concerns about the livability of downtown Portland. Rather it concluded “that the proposed luxury condominium project represents a unique opportunity in a market with limited supply of new and comparable for-sale product.”<sup>279</sup>

Moreover, it is unclear who will be attracted to the location. Block 216 is located on the northern edge of Portland's Downtown District, commonly known as the West End, which known by Portlanders for having one of the “rougher” street scenes in the urban core (see figure 1). The West End is also a relative food, shopping, and nightlife desert compared to the nearby Pearl District known for its vibrant street life. Despite prospering as a food cart pod, the 10<sup>th</sup> and Alder Street parcel was far from prime commercial real-estate even before the pandemic, according to real estate broker Brad Golik and echoed by many locals.<sup>280</sup> That assessment has only deepened over the following years. Views from the luxury condos would showcase the Pearl District and the trophy neighborhoods in the Southwest Hills, feeding the flames of buyer's remorse (see figure 1). Perhaps the only viable demographic is absentee foreign nationals, who may fall for the developer's glossy sales pitch and never get around to ground truthing the property. These qualitative speculations of a local gain additional credibility given signs Block 216's developers are restructuring debt and attempting to cover anticipated losses despite the firms' expected outward displays of confidence.

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<sup>279</sup> Manning and Njus, “Betting on the Ritz.”

<sup>280</sup> Manning, “Developer Seeks New Investors for Ritz-Carlton Hotel under Construction in Downtown Portland.”

#### 2.4: *Trouble in Paradise*

The roughly \$600 million project was initially funded with \$450 million in borrowed money and \$137.8 million from investors who expect to see \$123 million in additional returns if they maintain the investment for 10-years due to annulled capital gains taxes from Block 216's OZ status.<sup>281</sup> The rest of Block 216's funding, some \$25 million, was put up directly by developer Walter Bowen, his friends, and his family.<sup>282</sup> Walter Bowen and BPM representatives have outwardly exhibited confidence at the project's progress and anticipated success, though this is the only expected tenor for *communiqués* considering BPM's status as an urban booster with hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of skin in the game. Actively facilitating financial partners, potential financial partners, or the general public losing confidence in Block 216 could come as a significant detriment to the project. The most prudent thing to do is disregard qualitative or normative statements by the developers unless backed by triangulable or verifiable figures.

One way to outwardly track BPM's financial status is to look at its holdings. In 2019, BPM sold six of its senior living centers in Oregon and California.<sup>283</sup> Over the course of 2021, during the long winter of the pandemic, BPM also sold off many assets. These included their Sunset Summit apartment complex in West Hills that closed for \$80.75 million; \$132.5 million in condominium interest for offices BPM's Broadway Tower

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<sup>281</sup> Manning and Njus, "Betting on the Ritz."

<sup>282</sup> Manning, "Developer Seeks New Investors for Ritz-Carlton Hotel under Construction in Downtown Portland."

<sup>283</sup> Manning, "Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Nears Completion with Few Apparent Hiccups, Defying Odds."

Mobile Food Displacement and Formalization: A Case Study of Portland's Block 216 project, which was completed in 2018;<sup>284</sup> and a Southwest Portland apartment building for \$55.25 million.<sup>285</sup> According to Bowen, "some proceedings from the [Broadway Tower condominium interest] went towards meeting commitments on Block 216."<sup>286</sup> More sales followed in the years since, such as The Alexander senior living facility which closed in February 2023 for \$57.8 million and "was the last senior living facility in BPM's portfolio."<sup>287</sup>

Recently in October 2023, the *Portland Business Journal* revealed that Bowen took out a \$3 million loan from Prosper Portland to help finance The Flock food which that will fill one section of Block 216's ground floor; the loan comes with a hefty 6.5% interest rate.<sup>288</sup> Taken at face value, it is unclear why a large company like BPM that as of 2017 has "undertaken over \$1 billion of acquisitions and financing" over its 30-plus years in business would take out such a small loan instead of shouldering the cost itself or securing it through a private lender.<sup>289</sup> Acknowledging that "Bowen has sold certain real estate and business holdings in recent months, [...] cut deals with local business luminaries Joe Weston and Michael Richardson to attract significant investments in the tower's construction," and is partially financing the \$8.8 million dollar food hall with \$2.1 million of his own money, the journalists report speculations that "Bowen [is] running low on cash."<sup>290</sup> Finally, the present is not an ideal time for new food halls considering

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<sup>284</sup> Bach, "Walter Bowen's BPM Real Estate Group Strikes \$55M Deal to Sell Apartment Building."

<sup>285</sup> Manning, "Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Nears Completion with Few Apparent Hiccups, Defying Odds."

<sup>286</sup> Bach, "Portland's Ritz-Carlton Developer on Why Things Are Looking Good for a 2023 Opening."

<sup>287</sup> Manning, "Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Nears Completion with Few Apparent Hiccups, Defying Odds."

<sup>288</sup> Manning and Russell, "Portland Agency to Loan \$3 Million for Flock Food Hall in Ritz-Carlton Tower."

<sup>289</sup> "Acquisitions and Financing - BPM."

<sup>290</sup> Manning and Russell, "Portland Agency to Loan \$3 Million for Flock Food Hall in Ritz-Carlton Tower."

Portland's first food hall, dubbed "the food hall that will change downtown forever" upon opening in 2016, went under in November 2023.<sup>291</sup>

Charitably, these developments may mean little by themselves in terms of BPM's general financial status. In other words, BPM is likely not selling off properties, collecting condominium interest, and taking out loans, as a desperate bid to increase liquidity for Block 216 related expenses. In fact, the firm purchased a \$110 million property in Phoenix in 2021, financed in such a way that allowed "capital gains taxes to be deferred on an investment property sale if another, similar property is bought."<sup>292</sup> BPM is a large firm that While Block 216 may easily be their most costly project—and risk—to date, but the firm evidently has deep pockets. Unfortunately, this is all that I can conclude. BPM Real Estate Group is not a publicly traded company and does not have public SEC filings. Additionally, the property is owned indirectly through BDC Washington Street, LLC as an affiliate of BPM also managed by CEO Walter Bowen.<sup>293</sup> *OpenCorporates* has copies of BDC's amended annual reports, but even assuming I have the skill to read them, they are locked behind a £972 paywall. For the purposes of this thesis, the finer points of its financial status are a black box; I have neither the scope nor the skills nor the time to probe further into this specific point. However, there are other more internal indications

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<sup>291</sup> Bach, "Downtown Portland Building, Home to Pine Street Market, Goes up for Sale."

<sup>292</sup> Manning, "Developer Seeks New Investors for Ritz-Carlton Hotel under Construction in Downtown Portland."; Bach, "Walter Bowen's BPM Real Estate Group Strikes \$55M Deal to Sell Apartment Building." The Bach piece mentions that the Phoenix was financed in such a way that allows "capital gains taxes to be deferred on an investment property sale if another, similar property is bought." I do not have the economics background to assess any latent significance of this maneuver.

<sup>293</sup> "BDC/WASHINGTON STREET, LLC :: Oregon (US) :: OpenCorporates."

of Block 216's financial stresses to examine—namely debt restructuring and a long, uphill battle to secure investors.

Despite outward displays of confidence, BPM has put out multiple calls for additional investor funding since 2019 with limited success despite the project's lucrative OZ status. While the available journalism is somewhat inconclusive,<sup>294</sup> it appears that BPM has tried to raise at least \$170 or \$283 million in investment in at least three or four pushes from 2019 to 2023.<sup>295</sup> In many cases exact final numbers on these calls are unavailable, but all have severely underperformed. An August 2019 offering for \$120 million attracted only \$35,519,000 as of January 2021<sup>296</sup> and \$60.3 million by March 2023;<sup>297</sup> BPM spokesman Pat Walsh conspicuously declined to comment on the backing status of a \$113 million call from 2020;<sup>298</sup> another equity offering filed for \$50 million in March 2020 managed to attract only \$200,000 twelve months later;<sup>299</sup> and BPM is still searching for investors as of March 2023.<sup>300</sup> Many, if not all, of these pushes took the form of amended Form Ds. This filing type is “attractive precisely because of the minimal disclosure requirements” and obscures “whether the filing denotes a significant new initiative to raise private capital or whether it is just paperwork required by the U.S. Securities and

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<sup>294</sup> In May 2021, *The Oregonian* mentions a 2020 fundraising venture with the goal of \$113 million. A July 2021 piece from *The Portland Business Journal* mentions a \$120 million fundraising venture, with the SEC filings to prove it, also from 2020. Judging by their similarities, it is possible that these ventures are the same, and *The Oregonian's* earlier piece was operating off incomplete information.

<sup>295</sup> Manning, “Developer Seeks New Investors for Ritz-Carlton Hotel under Construction in Downtown Portland.”; Bach, “Investors Snub Portland's Ritz-Carlton Tower, despite Incentives.”; Manning, “Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Nears Completion with Few Apparent Hiccups, Defying Odds.”

<sup>296</sup> Bach, “Investors Snub Portland's Ritz-Carlton Tower, despite Incentives.”

<sup>297</sup> Manning, “Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Nears Completion with Few Apparent Hiccups, Defying Odds.”

<sup>298</sup> Manning, “Developer Seeks New Investors for Ritz-Carlton Hotel under Construction in Downtown Portland.”

<sup>299</sup> Bach, “Investors Snub Portland's Ritz-Carlton Tower, despite Incentives.”

<sup>300</sup> Manning, “Portland Ritz-Carlton Tower Nears Completion with Few Apparent Hiccups, Defying Odds.”



Exchange Commission,” potentially a move by BPM to keep key information about their finances under wraps considering negative tradeoffs associated with amended Form D's.<sup>301</sup>

The lack of investor confidence may also apply to the lenders, including Mosaic Real Estate Investors and Bowen himself. Mosaic is responsible for a mammoth \$400 construction loan, and in 2021 was attempting to “sell some portion of that debt to other lenders, investors and others” with the caveats that buyers were interested and a BPM spokesperson insists this is a “common practice” and “seamless non-event.”<sup>302</sup> For Bowen's part, one May 2021 investment push was intended “in part to build a contingency fund and to repay Bowen some of the money he's already invested in the Ritz project.”<sup>303</sup> It appears that Bowen wanted more investors in part to pay himself back the at least \$25 million he invested in Block 216, which does not demonstrate his confidence in the project. BPM has consistently projected confidence in their project on the public relations stage; however, the flow of money behind the scenes suggests a more troubled story.

In sum, not only did Block 216 uproot one of the most locally beloved and internationally renowned Portland landmarks, scattering the small-time owner-operators who relied on it to the wind; is likely to significantly underdeliver on the criteria its developers promise; and is embedded in a development and financing environment built upon neoliberal urban policy shibboleths that are more adept at funneling public money

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<sup>301</sup> Manning.

<sup>302</sup> Manning, “Developer Seeks New Investors for Ritz-Carlton Hotel under Construction in Downtown Portland.”

<sup>303</sup> Manning.

upwards than actually bettering the lives of the average Portlander; there are multiple longstanding signs that BPM is facing considerable financial trouble of its own. Only time will tell what this means for Block 216 and Portland. While a Portland Housing Bureau spokesperson reported over email that they have “a recorded Inclusionary Housing covenant on title to the property, providing some protection in that the condominium units cannot sell without its release,” the city may possibly never see the \$7.76 million affordable housing penalty in the event the project goes under. In any case, PHB will not receive any of the penalty money until December 2025, barring the unlikely possibility that BPM manages to close on over 80% of the Ritz-Carleton condos before then. One can only speculate about the details of Block 216 defaulting on their hundreds of million in loans might look like for the city, but it is safe to say that it would mean nothing good for public sector, private sector, or civic confidence and would likely feed the vicious cycle impeding downtown Portland's post-pandemic recovery.<sup>304</sup> It would be a crippling blow to the livelihoods of many of the most vulnerable Portlanders, including food cart vendors who rely on the foot traffic provided by a vibrant downtown.

The promise and peril of Block 216 is in the pudding. It is ultimately up to the avarices of the market and the arrow of time; however, there is still urgent work that must be done to preserve, protect, and improve the status of food carts for their operators, their customers, and through them downtown Portland's public realm. While the Alder Pod is gone for good, and a chapter in the life of Portland's mobile food scene has ended,

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<sup>304</sup> Siegel, “How the ‘Urban Doom Loop’ Could Pose the next Economic Threat.”

a new and brighter future may be possible—though not without considerable political work and a lucid, critical look of present circumstances.

## Chapter Three: The Future of Portland Mobile Food

### 3.1: *Fortress PDX*

The title of this subchapter is an allusion to “Fortress LA,” a chapter in the late Marxist geographer and urban historian Mike Davis’ seminal history of Los Angeles, *City of Quartz*.<sup>305</sup> The present and future of Portland’s central city street food scene evinces disturbing homologies to the Southern California hellscape described by Davis, notably the contraction and armoring of the urban street against undesirables—the city’s burgeoning homeless population—articulated through the design of many formalized, purpose-built, and embourgeoisified street food installations. A new generation of careerist and corporate food cart pods seek to privatize the public goods that flow from their more accessible, affordable, and visible predecessors. At least one of these is backed by the Downtown Clean & Safe (DC&S) enhanced service district, a largely unaccountable public-private partnership headed by an ex-cop and financed by ratepayers which effectively functions as a homeowners association for downtown business heavyweights, including Block 216.<sup>306</sup> Many of these new food cart pods and food halls engage in ‘diversity washing,’ selling the image of social justice to the “gastropolitian *habitus*” of Portland’s predominantly white professional-managerial class and out-of-state tourists, while essentially pulling up the ladder that makes food carts a viable pursuit for

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<sup>305</sup> Davis, “Fortress LA.”

<sup>306</sup> “Meet the Team – Downtown Portland Clean & Safe.”

immigrants and the working class (via culinary gentrification).<sup>307</sup> While a victim of culinary gentrification, food carts may also be weaponized as gentrification's leading edge—glass cannons often owned and operated by marginalized groups used to carve the way for real estate developers and the middle class. In Portland, food carts may just as well supplement William Clay's classic assertion that artists and bohemians are the first stage of gentrification.<sup>308</sup>

As established in chapter one, the nature of Portland's food cart pods is changing as property values have risen post-recession in the downtown core and outlying urban neighborhoods. As established in chapter two, the parking-turned-real-estate firm Downtown Development Group (DDG) has sought to redevelop their significant downtown landholdings since 2015, many of which are pay-to-park lots featuring prominent food cart pods. These landholdings include the ex-Alder Pod now the site of Block 216, the Washington Pod, the original Stark Pod, and another two blocks east.<sup>309</sup> Many of DDG's other surface parking lots, such as the one on SW 12<sup>th</sup> and Yamhill, one or several food carts that have not quite reached a pod-sized critical mass. It should be obvious that many if not all of these downtown pods are not long for this world; as Jones puts it in July 2019, "Now land is at a premium, so these lots are going to start disappearing and getting developed. The future of food carts in Portland is grim."<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, "Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?"

<sup>308</sup> Clay, *Neighborhood Renewal*.

<sup>309</sup> "Development Sites."

<sup>310</sup> Damewood, "The Disappearing Food Cart."

A new generation of food cart pods and food halls have been ascendant since the early 2010s. Typically located on the Portland Eastside and in outlying neighborhoods where land is less expensive, they are purpose-built for food carts by “restaurant mogul” landlords with an established portfolio of eateries and other real estate.<sup>311</sup> For vendors, the next-generation pods contain amenities such as sewage, water, and natural gas hookups. For customers, they contain amenities such as plumbed toilets, covered seating, atmospheric lighting, and even enclosed areas with climate control. Examples include Happy Valley Station, Prost!, Portland Beer Garden, and Hawthorne Asylum. This next generation of food cart pods is supplemented by an even newer generation of city center food halls which operate from the ground level of existing buildings. These include Portland Food Hall, Pine Street Market, Food Cart Alley, and Block 216's The Flock. The oldest of these food halls—Pine Street Market—dates from 2016.<sup>312</sup>

For the purposes of this analysis, there are two important commonalities between Portland's next-generation food cart pods and food halls that distance them from the traditional city center food cart pods. One is the higher rents cart owners and stall renters pay for space in fully furnished pods and food halls. For instance, Hawthorne Asylum carts paid \$2,945 plus utilities in May 2022,<sup>313</sup> while well-equipped but traditionally styled and not-for-profit Cart Blocks charged \$1500 per month in winter 2021,<sup>314</sup> and one location with minimal amenities located in an industrial part of Southeast Portland was

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<sup>311</sup> Shah, “Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon.”

<sup>312</sup> “Pine Street Market - About.”

<sup>313</sup> Peel, “Dissatisfaction at a Famed Food Cart Pod Demonstrates Why Multnomah County Wants to Regulate Them.”

<sup>314</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

going for \$950 per month in November 2023.<sup>315</sup> Next-generation pod's high rent makes them less viable for aspiring vendors with little seed money who often come from marginalized backgrounds, and the rent difference is passed on to diners through food prices.

The second commonality is the enclosure and armoring of Portland's mobile foodscape for the middle class. Hawthorn Asylum is encased in a ten foot high stone wall topped in razor wire, which its DC Comics-inspired name justifies with as much cheek as menace. Prost! is surrounded by thick wooden and chain-link fencing. Food carts at Happy Valley Station's plug their vending window into the flanks of a fully enclosed, barnlike food hall. I hereafter refer to these next-generation food cart pods as "food courtyards" to emphasize their armored, insulated, and classed character as distinct from traditional street-facing and class-heterogenous food cart pods. Similarly, the city center food halls are partitioned off from the streetscape with sliding doors, double-glazed windows, sophisticated video surveillance systems, and often private security guards.

Mike Davis referred to this model of urban design as "fortified cells" which brutally divide a city's affluent from the urban poor in a mirage of paranoid security culture that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby "'security' has less to do with personal safety than with the degree of personal insulation [...] from 'unsavory' groups and individuals, even crowds in general."<sup>316</sup> Middle class urban or suburban 'cartivores'<sup>317</sup> could conceivably slip from the hermetic comfort of their car into the equally hermetic,

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<sup>315</sup> "Huge Food Cart Lot Available in Southeast in Portland, Oregon - Food Truck Space for Rent."

<sup>316</sup> Davis, "Fortress LA."

<sup>317</sup> A term coined by Kelley and Kelly in their book *Cartopia: Portland's Food Cart Revolution*.

controlled food courtyards or food halls “with minimum exposure to the public street.”<sup>318</sup>

These food courtyards are equipped food carts heralding their cuisine as local, organic and ethnic, fitting what Agyeman et al. label the gastropolitian *habitus*,<sup>319</sup> alongside bohemian chic amenities and design elements like Edison bulb string lights, on-tap boutique alcohol,<sup>320</sup> eclectic seating typologies, and ‘public’ art distinct from the atmosphere and trappings of working class food cart pods.<sup>321</sup>

According to *ex-Portland Business Journal* journalist Aliza Earnshaw, responsible for some of the most in-depth turn-of-the-millennium coverage of Portland's mobile food scene and food cart regular of over two decades, there have been other changes, all of which are hallmarks of culinary gentrification. Prices have risen dramatically over the past decade, where even during the mid 2010s diners could buy \$8 vegan bulgogi” at prices lower than brick-and-mortar restaurants; the number of specialty and exotic options has grown tremendously to the point where diners can get Burmese food, even Burmese vegan food now; and the shift to cashless both accelerated during the pandemic and held after it.<sup>322</sup> Earnshaw's anecdotal example of Asian cuisines from smaller nations is also suggestive of culinary gentrification. While analyzing the cuisines offered by a large random sample of brick-and-mortar restaurants in Portland's “gentrified neighborhoods,” which includes most of the central city,<sup>323</sup> Karishma Shah notes that there are a disproportionate number of Asian restaurants compared to the percentage

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<sup>318</sup> Davis, “Fortress LA.”

<sup>319</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, “Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?”

<sup>320</sup> Korfhage, “Drink Mobile,” October 14, 2014.

<sup>321</sup> Roy and Rodgers, *Cartopia*.

<sup>322</sup> Earnshaw, Interview with Aliza Earnshaw.

<sup>323</sup> Bates, “Economic Vulnerability Assessment.”

share of Asian Portlanders.<sup>324</sup> Shah is forced to conclude “it is more probable that non-Asians are opening Asian restaurants” than a wildly disproportionate number of Asian immigrants decide to become restauranteurs, though this assessment may apply less to food carts given the disproportionately high rate of immigrant proprietorship.<sup>325</sup>

The overall image of “fortified cell” food courtyards suggests a similar image to the “soft environments” of LA’s Bunker Hill designed for white-collar workers on lunch breaks, upper and middle income urban residents, and tourists.<sup>326</sup> They are comprised of “an opulent complex of squares, fountains, world-class public art, exotic shrubbery, and avant-garde street furniture.”<sup>327</sup> To Davis, it was only too clear who these ostensibly public spaces were designed for:

Today's upscale, pseudo-public spaces [...] are full of invisible signs warning off the underclass 'Other.' Although architectural critics are usually oblivious to how the built environment contributes to segregation, pariah groups—whether poor Latino families, young Black men, or elderly homeless white females—read the meaning immediately.<sup>328</sup>

Crucially, unlike LA’s Bunker Hill, Portland’s food courtyards are located on private, not public land. The former must rely on class *habitus* embedded in the urban design reinforced by policing and microsocial cues, where “the occasional appearance of a destitute street nomad [...] sets off a quiet panic; video cameras turn on their mounts and security guards adjust their belts.”<sup>329</sup> The latter by contrast, as an explicit place of commerce situated on private land, have a far wider ambit to regulate who obtains access. Even if individual food cart vendors accept cash, do not mind homeless Portlanders, and

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<sup>324</sup> Shah, “Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon.”

<sup>325</sup> Shah.

<sup>326</sup> Davis, “Fortress LA.”

<sup>327</sup> Davis.

<sup>328</sup> Davis.

<sup>329</sup> Davis.



are open to establishing mutually beneficial transactional and convivial relationships like those at the Alder Pod, food courtyards' more hands-on landlords often backed by private security work to keep them out. The timeworn American anti-hippie opprobrium springs to mind: 'no shirt, no shoes, no service.'

### *3.2: Midtown Beer Garden: Bunker and Bargaining Chip*

Perhaps the most directly relevant case study of the design tendencies associated with the food courtyards is the newly-opened Midtown Beer Garden, built on a half block parcel owned by DDG. The design of Midtown Beer Garden is an exemplar of the paranoid security excesses endemic to food courtyards (figure 15). The perimeter is armored by a tall, sturdy wood and wire fence. The carts arranged around it like a latter-day wagon fort serving as an additional layer of visual buffer between genteel professional class diners and the public street. Glock-toting security guards are stationed at the north and south entrances. Finally, a "security mast" rises from the center of the pod, festooned with cameras, motion sensors, loudspeakers, and a dormant police beacon. While adorned with leafy planters and with its concrete slab flooring bizarrely slathered in 100 pounds of gold mica flakes,<sup>330</sup> the end result is disconcerting and rather ugly. However, Davis emphasizes that contrary to "hackneyed liberal complaints about 'bland design' and 'elitist' planning practices," the hardened exterior and claustrophobic interior of 'fortified cells' like the Midtown Beer Garden are not due to "an inadvertent failure of design, but [are a] deliberate socio-spatial strategy" intended to keep undesirably classed—and by

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<sup>330</sup> *Midtown Beer Garden Opens, Hopes to Attract Visitors Back to Downtown Portland.*

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extension racialized—populations out.<sup>331</sup> The developers' consistent effort to market the Beer Garden as an urban “oasis”—in that case, what would be the desert?—lends credence to Davis' position.<sup>332</sup>



Figure 15: Photos of the Midtown Beer Garden on opening night on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Clockwise from top left, armed security guard at the south gate, inner courtyard, view of the site from across 5th Street, "security mast" (photos credit: author).

<sup>331</sup> Davis, “Fortress LA.”

<sup>332</sup> “Midtown Beer Garden Opens with Aim to Bring Visitors Back to Downtown Portland.”

The Midtown Beer Garden is of special symbolic significance because it replaced the hallowed Stark Pod, the pod which started it all in 1997. According to the Beer Garden's financiers, "all 10 carts from the old pod were invited to return to the renovated pod, and all are doing so" despite the significant \$2000 per month starting rent that does not include utilities—water, sewage, natural gas, and electricity.<sup>333</sup> The financier's magnanimous 10-cart figure is not above reproach, considering that the most recent Google Streetview footage of the Stark Pod, dating from August 2019, shows at least 25 carts onsite. That number may very well have shrunk due to the pandemic, new pod rules implemented in January 2022, and a propane tank explosion that same August,<sup>334</sup> however, organically shedding at least 60% of the carts in a lucrative midtown pod over four years strains credulity.<sup>335</sup> Additionally, the Beer Garden's official website as of November 2023 lists twelve "legacy carts," not ten.<sup>336</sup>

Midtown Beer Garden is backed by two firms, Expensify which is "fronting the money for the pod renovations" and ChefStable, which is "handling the project and launch logistics" including day-to-day management.<sup>337</sup> ChefStable is a business development firm that has a long track record in designing, building, and operating restaurants, food halls, and food courtyards in Portland.<sup>338</sup> ChefStable undoubtedly fits Shah's restaurant mogul classification, "people [or firms] who open several successful, trendy restaurants in [...] gentrified tracts" with substantial business experience catering

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<sup>333</sup> Hamilton, "Why Is Portland's Oldest Food Cart Pod Taking Cash from a Tech Company?"

<sup>334</sup> Klemenz, "'A Huge Boom' Explodes a Food Cart in Downtown Portland Pod."

<sup>335</sup> "Food Cart Pods Can Soon Apply for New License; Inspections to Begin Early 2022."

<sup>336</sup> "Midtown Beer Garden."

<sup>337</sup> Hamilton, "Why Is Portland's Oldest Food Cart Pod Taking Cash from a Tech Company?"

<sup>338</sup> "About | ChefStable."

to Agyeman et al.'s gastropolitian *habitus*.<sup>339</sup> Expensify is a publicly traded software firm and just opened their Portland office next door to the Beer Gardens. Acknowledging the food courtyard “is a horrible for-profit business model” that will take around seven years to break even, Expensify’s public rationale for funding the project is enticing their employees to come into the office instead of working from home,<sup>340</sup> likely informed by a high-profile 2012 study that food cart proximity sharply drives vacancy rates in nearby offices,<sup>341</sup> plus standard public relations *noblesse oblige* statements about wanting to play a part in revitalizing Portland’s ailing downtown and catalyzing “a renaissance for surrounding businesses as well.”<sup>342</sup> Expensify officially fielded between \$100,000 and \$1 million for the renovation, although a source close to the project who wished to stay anonymous said the true cost was likely close to \$2 million.<sup>343</sup>

The anonymous source went on to suggest an additional reason Expensify’s may have financed the Midtown Beer Garden—to make entrée with Downtown Clean & Safe (DC&S). DC&S is one of three Enhanced Service District (ESDs), Portland’s version of Business Improvement Districts. ESDs and Business Improvement Districts are a neoliberal urban governance model whereby “property and business owners fund extra services such as trash cleanup, graffiti removal, community safety and business development” that are traditionally paid for by local governments.<sup>344</sup> DC&S encompasses 213 city blocks along the Portland south waterfront, encompassing Old Town/Chinatown,

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<sup>339</sup> Shah, “Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon.”

<sup>340</sup> Hamilton, “Why Is Portland’s Oldest Food Cart Pod Taking Cash from a Tech Company?”

<sup>341</sup> Raicht and McClenaghan, “Food Carts Fill Buildings as Well as Bellies.”

<sup>342</sup> Spencer, “Backed by Expensify, Midtown Beer Garden Opens Sunday with a Downtown Party.”

<sup>343</sup> Spencer.

<sup>344</sup> “Enhanced Service Districts | Portland.Gov.”

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Downtown, and parts of West End, and The Pearl (see figure 1). It includes all sites discussed in this thesis (figure 16).

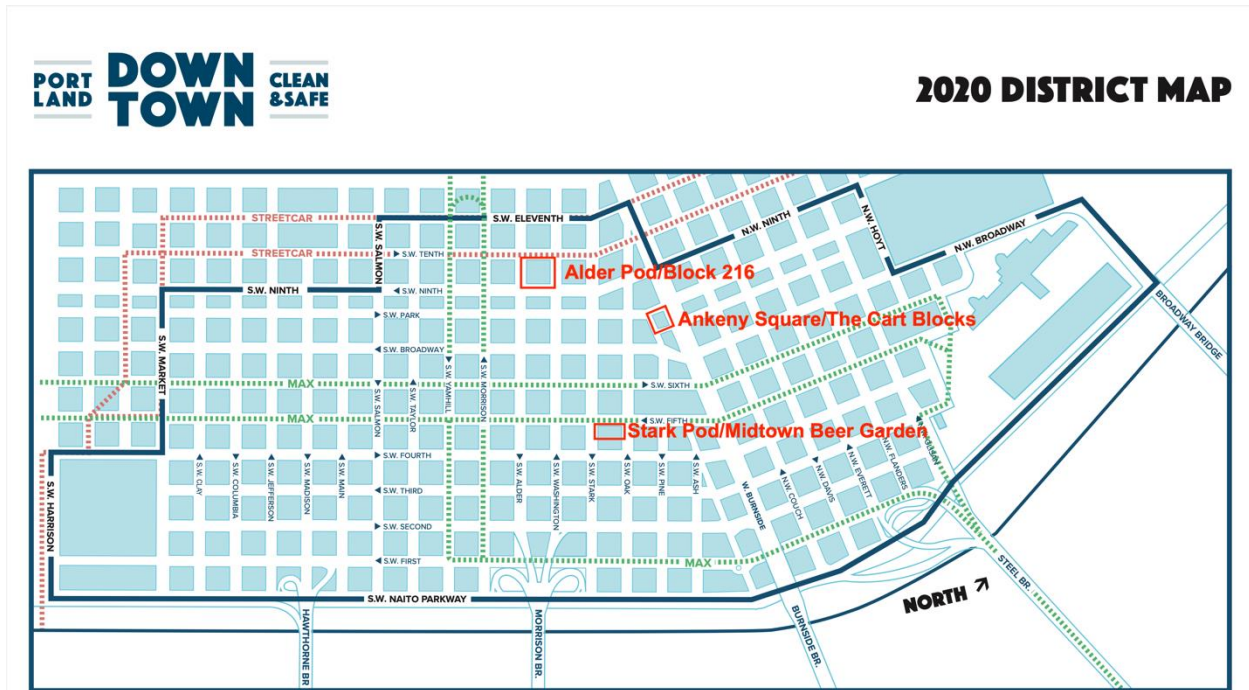


Figure 16: Map of Downtown Clean & Safe's service district, with relevant locations marked (graphic credit: Downtown Clean & Safe).

Many criticisms have been levied against DC&S and ESDs in recent years which center around four points. First, DC&S enjoys an abject lack of accountability and oversight to civil society<sup>345</sup> and the public sector.<sup>346</sup> Second, DC&S enjoys a lack of independent fiscal oversight with the Bureau of Revenue Services, at least circa 2020, taking their annual auditing as a matter of faith.<sup>347</sup> Third, DC&S shunts public money into policing efforts that directly accounted for at least 40% of its \$6.4 million expenditures during the 2022 fiscal year, including a private security detail contracted through

<sup>345</sup> "End Clean & Safe."

<sup>346</sup> Caballero et al., "Enhanced Services Districts: City Provides Little Oversight of Privately Funded Public Services."

<sup>347</sup> "Locked Out, Gentrified, Criminalized: Abolish Enhanced Service Districts."

GardaWorld and four handpicked Portland Police Department bicycle cops.<sup>348</sup> This 'public safety program' is known for its "aggressive" targeting of homeless Portlanders<sup>349</sup> and disproportionately targeting Portlanders of color.<sup>350</sup> Fourth, even after their emphasis on heavy-handed law and order tactics, the interests and values of DC&S's big business ratepayers likely do not align with that of the downtown Portland community *in toto*.

One CBO reveals that

the Portland Metro Chamber (formerly Portland Business Alliance) uses revenue collected through the Clean & Safe ESD to compensate its executives and lobby for business interests at the expense of residents. In other words, Portland's ESDs exist to protect and serve the city's wealthiest residents.<sup>351</sup>

Though funded through different mechanisms, DC&S structural relationship with civic life is reminiscent of Los Angeles' "powerful and largely unaccountable Community Redevelopment Agency" as described by Davis.<sup>352</sup> My anonymous source suggested Expensify invested significant capital in the Midtown Beer Garden to throw around its weight at a major new ratepayer. Seen in this light, Expensify's grandiose capital investment and talk about catalyzing a post-pandemic renaissance for surrounding businesses is a political maneuver to curry favor with veteran ratepayers and the DC&S board of directors, which includes the Block 216 Ritz-Carleton's general manager and the CEO of DDG. Expensify aims to acquire privileged access to DC&S's janitorial, business advocacy, and security services. Expensify curries favor with DC&S in other ways too. The Midtown Beer Garden, whose official web presence consists only of a tab on Expensify's

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<sup>348</sup> Wells and Paschal, "Annual Impact Report."

<sup>349</sup> Hayden, "Downtown Portland Clean & Safe: Who Is and Isn't It Keeping Safe?"

<sup>350</sup> "Locked Out, Gentrified, Criminalized: Abolish Enhanced Service Districts."

<sup>351</sup> "End Clean & Safe."

<sup>352</sup> Davis, "Fortress LA."

website, offers free meals to on-duty “first responders,” clearly engineered to benefit beat cops and DC&S's armed security contractors.<sup>353</sup>

### 3.3: *Additional Notes on Mobile Food and Culinary Gentrification*

As alluded to throughout this section, the socio-spatial character of food courtyards signifies the gentrification of Portland's mobile food landscape. Higher rents drive up food prices and make financial barriers for entry steeper. Fences and other security features keep classed and racialized undesirables out. For instance, even if homeless Portlanders manage to negotiate their way into food courtyards and find food they can afford, the cashless new normal prevents them from patronizing. The turning-inward of food cart pods to food courtyards abets antisocial and class segregationist mindsets that run counter to the heterogeneous conviviality of the street which Davis identifies with Olmstedian and Keyensian visions of social democracy and the American *polis*.<sup>354</sup> On the cultural front, some researchers identify shifts in the cultural character of Portland's food carts coterminous with gentrification. On the macro level, Hanser and Hyde writing back in 2014 note that

[i]n Portland, cheap and “generic” ethnic food carts generate little enthusiasm whereas hip or exotic carts have become so symbolic of that city's creative energy and DIY spirit that food carts are regularly featured in Oregon Tourism Commission advertisements. The aesthetic and ethical characteristics associated with North America's new street food scene have come to be especially valued, associating “good food” with the consumer tastes of relatively affluent urbanites seeking out “diverse” and “ethnic” culinary experiences.<sup>355</sup>

Agyeman et al. provide a more detailed, quantitative look in their 2017 inventory of cart pods on Portland's generally less white and more working-class Eastside that supports

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<sup>353</sup> “Midtown Beer Garden.”

<sup>354</sup> Davis, “Fortress LA.”

<sup>355</sup> Hanser and Hyde, “Foodies Remaking Cities.”

Hanser and Hyde's observations.<sup>356</sup> Agyeman et al. conclude that working-class cart pods are characterized by a culinary *habitus* that includes less elaborate spatial configurations and décor; affordable, family-friendly prices; and non-flashy but fresh, authentic, and handmade ethnic food largely prepared by and marketed towards nonwhite Portlanders.<sup>357</sup> In contrast, mobile food oriented towards the gastropolitian *habitus* include elaborate spatial configurations and décor; more expensive fare; and a multifocal, sometimes contradictory culinary values system that emphasizes localness, seasonality, eco-friendliness, authenticity,<sup>358</sup> and innovation.<sup>359</sup>

Another component of the gastropolitian *habitus* is ineffectual 'diversity washing,' developers and landlords deceptively harnessing social justice language articulated exclusively as race. Gentrified mobile food sites and food halls, including Block 216's The Flock, frequently advertise commitments to platforming minority-owned businesses.<sup>360</sup> This style of alleged consumer activism is attractive to the progressive, overwhelmingly white professional class Portlanders these sites are designed for; however, not every minority-owned business is created equal. These gentrified sites are only realistic for vendors that are already well-to-do and successful—a far cry from the recent immigrants and working-class self-starters long understood as the pioneers and champions of Portland's mobile food landscape. For instance, every "star-studded" vendor in Block 216's

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<sup>356</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, "Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?"

<sup>357</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel.

<sup>358</sup> Agyeman et al. lay out a sophisticated and robust analysis of how differing notions of authenticity are tensely negotiated between working-class and gastropolitian *habitus*, including their role in gentrification. Further unpacking their work is beyond the scope of this thesis and rather redundant; go read their paper.

<sup>359</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, "Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?"

<sup>360</sup> Jackson-Glidden, "These Are the Restaurants Opening Within Downtown's Star-Studded Food Hall."



luxury Flock food hall is either an industry veteran or an already successful brick-and-mortar owner.<sup>361</sup> Additionally, Food courtyards,<sup>362</sup> food halls, and urban development projects such as the Culinary Corridor<sup>363</sup> seek to emphasize “highly curated” culinary options—another way of saying the new generation of hands-on landlords and developers consciously picks established “winners” who sure to turn a profit, instead of continuing food cart pods’ traditional status as culinary incubators.<sup>364</sup>

Finally, gentrification is evidently taking place within Portland’s mobile food realm, but mobile food may also play a role in gentrification *in toto*. These next several paragraphs are intended to outline a theory. They are not an authoritative statement; focused future qualitative and quantitative research is needed. In an October 2018 article for the *Portland Mercury*, “Portland-based urban planner Lizzy Caston [...] suggested the possibility of allowing carts to set up in blighted public spaces” as an solution to food cart displacement from the rapidly redeveloping city center.<sup>365</sup> This begs the questions what constitutes a ‘blighted’ area, what is needed in order for food carts to be successful in one, and what a ‘blighted area’ should be transformed into. One need not be reminded of the extent to which perceived blight has been used an excuse to uproot otherwise functional neighborhood occupied by predominantly working class people of color, initially through 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘slum clearance’ projects that replaced poor neighborhoods in cities like New York City and St. Louis with shoddy project housing.

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<sup>361</sup> Jackson-Glidden.

<sup>362</sup> Strickland, “Rolling in a New Direction.”

<sup>363</sup> Burmeister, Huerta, and Gragg, “The Culinary Corridor.”

<sup>364</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>365</sup> Damewood, “The Disappearing Food Cart.”

As *en mass* direct public-sector investment in housing has become politically impossible since at least the Reagan revolution, the slower and more subtle but by no means less insidious gentrification methods have become the norm. Efforts to remedy perceived or actual blight may come with the promise of future livability; however as the neighborhood becomes more popular and more livable, businesses see the area as a good up-and-coming place to invest, and rent prices increase—pricing out the very underserved working-class residents that the urban livability efforts were meant to help. In the context of Portland, “as Portland attempts to become more livable, it is pricing out existing residents who are moving further and further away from the city center.”<sup>366</sup> If food carts and other street food typologies are drivers of livability, it stands to reason that they can also contribute to gentrification.

Consider Phillip Clay's seminal four stages of gentrification hypothesis.<sup>367</sup> First artists and bohemians flee to dilapidated or abandoned areas in search of cheaper rent. Second comes the middle class, encouraged by small-time developers and relators looking for fixer-uppers and the hipness that may come with a blooming art scene. Third comes large-scale capital investment driven by banks and corporate developers; it is during this stage that the original residents—especially renters—and artists begin being priced out. The fourth stage is a continuation of the third, when the real-estate landscape of an area surpasses mixed-income housing and transitions to upper-class living with the cultural amenities and trappings to match; now even the middle class may feel the pressure of

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<sup>366</sup> Shah, “Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon.”

<sup>367</sup> Clay, *Neighborhood Renewal*.

rising rents. Swathes of Portland's central city, including The Pearl and the West End, seem to be between the third and fourth stages.<sup>368</sup> Referencing the Alder Pod eviction, an article in *Eater* magazine writes the tragedy "should serve as a cautionary tale for any city undergoing an influx of new residents and business investments, where lower-income, immigrant, and other vulnerable populations are displaced by successive waves of people attracted to the very culture those populations helped create."<sup>369</sup> A similar story is true in downtown San Francisco, where over twenty years "street food [...] was first enthusiastically choreographed by leading advocates, then romanticized by public policies, and, finally, displaced by urban boosters."<sup>370</sup> In Portland, food carts are being displaced right alongside artists, bohemians, and original residents for luxury high rises like Block 216. It is unlikely that food carts are the primary beneficiaries of gentrification. Based on the robust, decade long pattern of food cart pods (and food courtyards) being displaced by new development (see chapter 1.3), is far more likely that food carts serve as gentrification's leading edge, weathering financial precarity in 'blighted' areas, followed by a period of prosperity, and eventually being displaced by the corporations and wealthier Portlanders they once served.

Like with artists and bohemians, food carts are being chased into less gentrified regions—often landing zones—with cheaper rents and land prices that are hospitable to food carts pods (and food courtyards). Of the 21 ex-Alder Pod carts recorded in the figure on page 24 of "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology," eleven were located outside of the

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<sup>368</sup> Bates, "Economic Vulnerability Assessment."

<sup>369</sup> Seibel, "Can Portland's Food Carts Survive the City's Development Boom?"

<sup>370</sup> Caramaschi, "Ingredients for Displacement."

central city, including eight on the Portland Eastside. It is here that the process would presumably begin again over the course of several decades, food carts and the communities who frequent them becoming victims of their own success. Professional class Portlanders will inevitably follow the carts. Between the pervasiveness of 'food adventuring'<sup>371</sup> and the gastropolitian habitus' valuation of authenticity,<sup>372</sup> with Portland's first-rate multimodal public transit system serving as a sort of monkey's paw, "the distance between a consumer and a restaurant [or food truck] does not necessarily impact that consumer's decision when choosing a restaurant [or food truck]."<sup>373</sup>

To examine what this might look like, a hopefully transferrable case study is Ankeny Square; as gentrification is a slow process, the transformation of Ankeny Square and the surrounding area should be observed closely over the following years. As outlined in chapter one, Ankeny Square was a clear example of a 'blighted' public space before The Cart Blocks took hold. As also outlined in chapter one, over the ensuing two years, the vendors and carts have weathered a number of hardships including petty theft, vandalism, harassment, and sexual assault. None of the carts went bankrupt to my knowledge despite the industry operating on razor-thin profit margins;<sup>374</sup> however, four or five left during the first winter. According to Jones, The Cart Blocks currently seems to be on the rise. Downtown foot traffic is gradually returning to pre-pandemic highs, eyes-

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<sup>371</sup> Hanser and Hyde, "Foodies Remaking Cities."

<sup>372</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, "Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?"

<sup>373</sup> Shah, "Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon."

<sup>374</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

on-the-street vigilance and judicious graffiti removal efforts have reduced incidences of petty crime, and vendors are reporting record profits.

The Cart Blocks is in a unique position, because it is located on public land under the aegis of Friends of the Green Loop, a nonprofit urban development NGO with close ties to civil society. It is highly unlikely that the food carts will be displaced, if for no reason other than they operate on public land; however, the same cannot be said about the residents and small businesses nearby nor in other locations around Portland where the first stage of culinary gentrification occurs. Nearby residents and small businesses may profit from the increased foot traffic, eyes-on-the-street, and a sense of collective ownership and pride in the short-term; however, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where they are not eventually priced out.

Even the best examples of food cart pods development combined with responsible and culturally-specific community engagement may not be the victory much of its popular and academic coverage makes it out to be. Established in 2010 in an East Portland neighborhood known for its high Latine population, the Portland Mercado is a “hub for Latino culture in Portland and initiative of Hacienda CDC that provides affordable retail space for businesses to launch and grow.”<sup>375</sup> The Mercado hosts incubator space for retail businesses, Latine community events, and a bustling food cart pod which opened in 2015 and exhibits a wide variety of Latine food by vendors from an equally variety of Latin American backgrounds. Hacienda CDC in turn is a “Latino-led Community Development Corporation that strengthens families by providing affordable housing, homeownership

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<sup>375</sup> “About Us.”

support, economic advancement and educational opportunities.”<sup>376</sup> The Portland Mercado as one of Hacienda CDC's many projects; it has also build 605 units of housing since its founding in 1986.<sup>377</sup> Proponents describe the Portland Mercado as “a great example of [a way] to pursue social equity in the distribution of resources” without contributing to gentrification and homelessness.<sup>378</sup>

Critiques by Black Marxists, critical race theorists, and social scientists that cultivating racial or ethnic petty bourgeoisie with their own distinct class interests do nothing to better the condition of the vast majority of people of color notwithstanding,<sup>379</sup> the Portland Mercado has an at-best mixed direct relationship to gentrification.

Importantly,

Food carts were not part of the original concept for the Portland Mercado, but they quickly became a key feature that could respond to the need to attract non-Latino customers from outside the immediate neighborhood—and one that would place the Mercado within Portland's gastropolitian foodscape.

The Hacienda exists in a delicate balancing act between Portland's working-class Latine population and predominantly white professional class culinary tourists driven by the gastropolitian *habitus*.<sup>380</sup> Such a struggle may contribute to gentrification. In 2013 and 2018, the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability drafted reports on the state of gentrification in Portland which include detailed maps broken down to census tract level.<sup>381</sup> In the 2013 report, the census tract that contains the Portland Mercado is not at

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<sup>376</sup> “Hacienda CDC - About Us.”

<sup>377</sup> “Hacienda CDC - About Us.”

<sup>378</sup> Marshall-Bird, “Without an Equity and Inclusion Tool Good Intentioned Planning and Public Policy Can Contribute to Gentrification and Homelessness.”

<sup>379</sup> Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*. is one seminal early example in an American context.

<sup>380</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, “Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?”

<sup>381</sup> Bates, “2013 Gentrification and Displacement Study - Appendix A: Supporting Maps.”; Bates, “2018 Gentrification and Displacement Neighborhood Typology Assessment - Supporting Maps.”

risk of gentrification. In the 2018 report, the same census tract is undergoing early type one gentrification—high shares of vulnerable populations that have not yet seen displacement but have seen high appreciation in the housing market since 2008 and with rentals since 2012.<sup>382</sup>

While correlation is not causation, and especially not with two data points, it seems unlikely that the Portland Mercado has played a measurable role in slowing or halting gentrification.<sup>383</sup> With more granular temporal and spatial data, it may also appear that the Portland Mercado has sparked gentrification or that a base level of gentrification was a necessary precondition for the location to support a Mercado in the first place. Such speculations have yet to be proven or disproven with any rigor; however, it is difficult to envision a situation in which proximity to a lively food cart pod and community center does not drive up property values and rents. Finally it is worth noting that the Portland Mercado, while financially highly successful, does not own the land it is built on as of 2017. The land is owned by Prosper Portland, which “has also tried to influence Hacienda’s management of the Mercado, pushing for rents to fully cover operating costs.”<sup>384</sup> Having Prosper Portland as the landowner and a powerful stakeholder with its independent development and financial interests could mean Portland Mercado

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<sup>382</sup> Bates, “2018 Gentrification and Displacement Neighborhood Typology Assessment.”

<sup>383</sup> A third datapoint might be the Economic Vulnerability Assessment GIS tool Dr. Bates assembled in partnership with the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (<https://pdx.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=e5c5d928ed254f60ae22a3c98b429559>). Unfortunately, it uses a different, complex metric to assess economic vulnerability than the 2013 and 2018 studies’ gentrification metrics. While the tool is updated regularly, the most recent update occurring on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023 at time of writing, it appears past data is not available through PortlandMaps, the City of Portland’s public GIS portal.

<sup>384</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, “Is It Local ... or Authentic and Exotic?”

risks displacement years—or likely decades—down the line, as with so many other food cart pods in gentrifying regions of the city. As Agyeman et al. conclude, “the long-term viability of [Portland Mercado’s] approach is yet to be seen,” as are the effects it may have on residents in the Forster-Powell neighborhood in East Portland.<sup>385</sup> If food carts are indeed a driver of gentrification, any strategy for saving them is made much more complicated and contentious. The following subchapter will explore the future of mobile food in Portland with these possibilities and others in mind.

### *3.4: What Is to Be Done?*

To begin, I would like to mention three interventions, developments, and problem areas underscored over the course of my data collection, research, and writing process. First, the original culinary corridor model as proposed by Randy Gragg is likely not feasible given the difficulties faced by The Cart Blocks who have attempted to implement it.<sup>386</sup> Snaking water, gas, sewage, and electrical lines over asphalt from a central source is a headache from an engineering perspective and blocks access to key utilities buried under streets, like storm drains and telecom cables. More transient installations in the right-of-way without extensive utility needs like pop-up shops, covid patios, and planters are better equipped to help take back city streets from automobile traffic. Second, multiple cart owner-operators mentioned struggling with a lack of reliable parking. While it is a truism that cities should take steps to reduce private car use as much as possible, food carts restocking presents a typology that cannot easily be replaced with mass transit;

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<sup>385</sup> Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel.

<sup>386</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.



many brick-and-mortar restaurants have the benefit of dedicated delivery vans and sometimes loading docks. Prosper Portland could work with vendors to assign them permanent parking spots at nearby garages, a street parking pass bundled into the permitting process, or at least some form of accident insurance—perhaps patchworked into the existing repair grant system. Third, Portland Housing Bureau should make the fee-in-lieu option more expensive for developers than simply integrating affordable housing into their project or even eliminate it entirely (see chapter 2.1). The current system does not adequately account for the social ills associated with not encouraging mixed-income housing, including increased class segregation and gentrification. Furthermore, developers would hopefully think twice about kicking the can down the road in respect to payment, as BPM is currently doing with Block 216.

In their 2021 whitepaper on the state of mobile food in Portland, Friends of the Green Loop offer thirteen policy recommendations that would benefit Portland's food carts. Several of the points were addressed in the 2021 policy changes which Friends of the Green Loop advised on, currently yielding mixed results.<sup>387</sup> Of the thirteen, the NGO's two core recommendations are (a) "create a position to act as the liaison between all City bureaus for food cart policy making, as well as a working group to encourage collaboration" or 'cart tsar' and (b) "create an inventory of potential food cart sites with the lot information and desirability criteria in order to mitigate displacement issues."<sup>388</sup> Tsar is an informal legal term used to describe high-level government appointments with

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<sup>387</sup> Jackson-Glidden, "New Regulations Are Threatening to Upend Portland's Food Cart Scene."

<sup>388</sup> Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

broad authorization to address to a narrow issue—typically a crisis or a thorny multi-sectoral issue. Tsar appointments are a common occurrence in urban governance. For instance, New York City appointed a rat tsar in April 2023,<sup>389</sup> and Portland appointed a trash tsar in May 2022.<sup>390</sup> In Portland, a cart tsar would help cut through departmental siloization and bureaucratic crosstalk of the sort that played a major role in delaying The Cart Blocks for two years (see chapter 1.3).<sup>391</sup>

While both are initiatives are wise, neither have yet been implemented as of fall 2023. First, there have been multiple attempts over the years to create a dynamic, up-to-date map of Portland's food carts. These include Travel Portland's Food Cart Finder,<sup>392</sup> StreetFoodFinder.com,<sup>393</sup> and FoodCartsPortland.com.<sup>394</sup> All are mostly failures. According to Tucker, such an endeavor is extraordinarily difficult because of food carts' mobility and high turnover rate; it is an effort she has considered undertaking on the behalf of OMFA before but for the time being has decided against, because it is clear the standard approaches have not been working.<sup>395</sup> Such an endeavor would likely require dedicated and highly motivated salaried staff, a level of bureaucratic centralization, an intensive advertising campaign to sign on food cart vendors, and tangible support from city authorities if undertaken privately. Perhaps the best current resource are crowdsourced, algorithmically curated urban platforms like Yelp which tends to

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<sup>389</sup> Oza et al., "New York City Appointed a Rat Czar. Her Job Will Be a Tall Ask."

<sup>390</sup> Staff, "Mayor Wheeler Hires 'Trash Czar' to Fix Portland's Garbage Problem."

<sup>391</sup> Wester et al., "Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology."

<sup>392</sup> "Portland Food Cart Finder - Portland Food Pods."

<sup>393</sup> "StreetFoodFinder - Find Your Favorite Food Trucks!"

<sup>394</sup> "FoodCartsPortland.Com | Find Portland's Best Food Carts."

<sup>395</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

reproduce classed dynamics associated with culinary gentrification<sup>396</sup>—a consistent problem seen across a spectrum of urban platform typologies.<sup>397</sup> Second, while Friends of the Green Loop's cart tsar proposal has not been implemented, it is likely that Measure 22-228's radical restructuring of Portland's city government in January 2025 will alleviate the worst of the current siloization and bureaucratic crosstalk.<sup>398</sup> Portland's current city commission government has existed since 1913, was intended to manage a much smaller city, and is widely regarded by citizens and city officials as ineffectual and obsolete.<sup>399</sup> Tucker also has high hopes that the current restrictions on mobile food trucks will be lifted in the near future, in part thanks to OMFA's policy advising efforts and in part thanks to more nimble, modernized city government.<sup>400</sup>

Of Friends of the Green Loop's eleven additional policy proposals, several are worthy of special mention. One is to change the mentality of carts as temporary uses for surface parking lots, a pernicious sentiment that exists in nearly all the journalistic coverage documenting changes in Portland's mobile food landscape and which even Tucker framed as something of an ambivalent inevitability.<sup>401</sup> The boilerplate urbanist argument against surface parking lots being they are a waste of space, prime contributor to urban heat islands, and encourage car use is true; however, city center food cart pods are not reducible to their hybrid function as parking lots.

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<sup>396</sup> Shah, "Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon."

<sup>397</sup> Boeing et al., "Tilted Platforms."

<sup>398</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>399</sup> Dixon Kavanaugh, "Portland Voters Scrap City's Odd Century-Old Form of Government, Approve Radical Remake."

<sup>400</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>401</sup> Tucker.

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, food cart pods are an internationally recognized signifier for Portland, culinary incubator that disproportionately serves minority and immigrants restauranteurs, overwhelmingly successful placemaking strategy, Olmstedian class melting pot, and significant direct and indirect revenue generator for both the public and private sector. In fact, a much publicized 2012 study demonstrated that Class A office space within two blocks of a downtown food cart pod have a 5% vacancy rate compared to the 8.3% 2012 average.<sup>402</sup> Vibrant downtown food cart pods may be just what the city needs to entice post-pandemic white collar workers to return to the city center. Retaining these pods may also ward against culinary gentrification from food cart displacement to outer-urban neighborhood and the 'cartivores' who follow them. Ultimately, considering the public goods the remaining downtown food cart pods provide, it makes sense to frame these parcels of land as food cart pods first and parking lots second. In that light, bulldozing them to make way for a mixed-use towers is akin to bulldozing parks—a horrifying, deeply problematic proposition in any context. Losing the remainder of Portland's downtown food cart pods due to the entrenched financial interests of commercial real estate developers and the disingenuous ideological framings that buttress them would be an unforgivable crime. This is not NIMBYism. The downtown pods must be saved.

Fortunately, is precedent for this maneuver. Pioneer Square, was a privately-owned surface parking lot until it was purchased by the city in 1979 and redeveloped into a

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<sup>402</sup> Raicht and McClenaghan, "Food Carts Fill Buildings as Well as Bellies."

public plaza that opened in 1984.<sup>403</sup> Over the years, Pioneer Square has become a Portland landmark, earned the moniker “Portland’s Living Room,” and has placed highly in competitions for best public park,<sup>404</sup> square,<sup>405</sup> and space.<sup>406</sup> The square features a variety of public art installations, sits as a transit serving all five lines of the MAX light rail, hosts dozens of city and civic events annually, serves as a venue for political expression, and as of 2023 is the only location in Portland where food carts can vend on public land.<sup>407</sup> If Pioneer Square is Portland’s Living Room, the Alder Pod was perfectly situated to become Portland’s Dining Room. While downtown land is far more expensive today than it was in 1979<sup>408</sup> and the 40-plus year old neoliberal project has worked to render such an endeavor politically unsalable, the City of Portland must take steps to protect one or several of the remaining city center food cart pods. This might take the form of the city purchasing a lot outright, possibly through flexing its powers of eminent domain. Such a motion would likely receive broad-based popular support from all stakeholders except for large downtown landowners like DDG and real-estate developers.

There are other potentially overlapping strategies, such as having non-profit organizations like Friends of the Green Loop manage food cart pods in public spaces, for instance Director’s Park, the North Park Blocks, Jamison Square, and the Tom McCall Waterfront. Recent history shows that city departments like Parks and BDS are reticent to

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<sup>403</sup> “Pioneer Courthouse Square | Portland.Gov.”

<sup>404</sup> “The World’s Best and Worst Parks (2004).”

<sup>405</sup> “2005 North America’s Great Public Squares.”

<sup>406</sup> “Pioneer Courthouse Square: Portland, Oregon.”

<sup>407</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>408</sup> For instance, the parcel that hosted the Alder Pod and currently hosts Block 216 changed hands for \$30 million in May 2021. For more information, see: Bach, “Walter Bowen-Tied Company Buys Block 216 Property for \$30 Million.”

manage pods themselves—one of the reasons The Cart Blocks took two years to open—and as of now, no public-sector organization has the experience to do so effectively.<sup>409</sup> Moreover, many of the traditional progressive and leftist critiques of public-private partnerships centered on “emerging effort to undermine the public sector, particularly the social safety net it has provided, and to reaffirm the ‘privileged position of business’” have little to say on the subject of fostering small businesses.<sup>410</sup> Finally, the city government and mobile food related NGOs must prioritize keeping carts in their original location whenever possible to preserve existing placemaking and communal ties. As Jane Jacobs wrote about slum clearance, “if too many slowly grown public relationships are disrupted at once, all kinds of havoc can occur—so much havoc, instability and helplessness that it sometimes seems time will never again get in its licks.”<sup>411</sup> As chapter 1.3 demonstrates, even though The Cart Blocks are located in a high-traffic area just three blocks from the old Alder Pod, being viciously uprooted from two decades of awareness and placemaking nearly did them in from the beginning.

Another critical objective is to better protect food cart vendors. Friends of the Green Loop provides multiple proposals to these ends, including mandating early notification of cart/pod displacement in multiple languages and the city assisting with vendor compliance and working towards the standardization of food cart build requirements.<sup>412</sup> I would like to suggest several other measures to protect vendors. Firstly,

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<sup>409</sup> Jones, Interview with Keith Jones from Friends of the Green Loop.

<sup>410</sup> Squires, “Partnership and the Pursuit of the Private City.”

<sup>411</sup> Jacobs, “The Uses of City Neighborhoods.”

<sup>412</sup> Wester et al., “Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology.”

I suggest the city should foster stronger relationships with industry advocates like OMFA and those organizations in turn actively seek to include vendors in goal formation. Many vendors, especially recent immigrants, experience language and knowledge barriers that prevent them from directly collectively advocating on their own behalf.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, there should be a legal mechanism for food cart owners to organize as tenants. This would provide a well-defined mechanism for collective bargaining against rent hikes, redevelopment-motivated evictions, and would hold property managers accountable for providing required and advertised amenities.

Finally, something must be done about the disturbing (but unsurprising) proposed link between food carts and gentrification. First is nearly *pro forma* within progressive and leftist academic discourse on gentrification to insinuate that almost any infrastructure improvement efforts and provisioning of social services, from both the top-down and bottom-up, feed further gentrification. While Tucker<sup>44</sup> and others argues that food carts and trucks can help fight food deserts, it is challenging to envision a scenario where they do not contribute to gentrification in the long term.<sup>45</sup> Other examples abound. For instance, “supermarket greenlining” occurs when healthful grocery stores move into impoverished communities and serve as a standard-bearer for other agents of gentrification.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, these grocery stores are usually unaffordable for impoverished residents, leading to displacement-triggering “food mirages,” where

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<sup>43</sup> Wester et al.

<sup>44</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

<sup>45</sup> Caramaschi, “Counteracting Food Deserts. The Potential for Mobile Food Vending in Regenerating Contemporary Cities.”; Wester et al., “Friends of Green Loop: Food Cartology.”

<sup>46</sup> Cohen, “Feeding or Starving Gentrification: The Role of Food Policy.”

residents must travel miles out of their way to source affordable groceries.<sup>417</sup> Proximity to efficient public transit<sup>418</sup> and active mobility infrastructure pushes up real-estate prices.<sup>419</sup> Food justice organizations whose “activists embody a hip green aesthetic that is palatable to affluent whites [...] can be appropriated by urban boosters to promote the neighborhood.”<sup>420</sup> Environmental remediation, parks, and even community gardens trigger “green gentrification.”<sup>421</sup>

Ostensible solutions like “just green enough” interventions “demand a careful balancing act” to reap the health benefits of urban greenspaces and environmental remediation which even then are left “requiring [continual] community activism” to forestall gentrification.<sup>422</sup> Moreover, the ‘just green enough’ moniker could be cynically but accurately reframed as ‘just grey, squalid, and polluted enough.’ Ultimately, gentrification is an insoluble condition at the heart of Capitalist market forces and land speculation: the rich will be left with everything and the poor with nothing, even the things they built for themselves. Trotsky famously wrote that “the place of art is in the rear of the historic advance.”<sup>423</sup> The same is true of urban design and spatial planning which, at least when unalloyed with emancipatory politics, only serve the wealthy.

Once acknowledged, many academics take one of two paths. Some pass the buck to vague, insufficient notions of community activism and tenant organizing led by CBOs

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<sup>417</sup> Shah, “Calculating the Impacts of Food Gentrification in Portland, Oregon.”

<sup>418</sup> Cohen, “Feeding or Starving Gentrification: The Role of Food Policy.”

<sup>419</sup> North Portland's Albina Neighborhood Is the Focus of New Book About Gentrification.

<sup>420</sup> Alkon and Cadji, “Sowing Seeds of Displacement.”

<sup>421</sup> Wolch, Byrne, and Newell, “Urban Green Space, Public Health, and Environmental Justice.”

<sup>422</sup> Wolch, Byrne, and Newell.

<sup>423</sup> Trotsky, “Revolutionary and Socialist Art.”



and marginalized people who are almost invariably both underfunded and understaffed compared to the hydras they are fighting against. On the other end of the spectrum are academics who propose seemingly 'post-politics' technocratic policy tweaks. Such tweaks may be legally 'nimble' but are still difficult to push through the political infrastructure. Real estate developers, banks, large landowners, and investment multinationals know full well how to fight against such measures and that it is in their best interests to do so. In the context of the climate crisis, environmental geographer and labor historian Matthew Huber refers to such an approach as "credentialed politics," where the "professional class mobilizes knowledge and credentials in the labor market to secure a stable career [leading] to a sociocultural class formation that valorizes knowledge in all aspects of social life, including politics" and is anti-populist, sometimes explicitly so.<sup>424</sup> These technocratic tweaks are often complex and difficult for the average person without extensive legal knowledge and credentials to understand, alienating the very people they are intended to fight for and benefit.<sup>425</sup> After all, it is one thing to catalyze mobilization around concrete goals like a higher minimum wage or keeping one's home; it is quite another to mobilize around property or tax law minutia.

One possible path forward that includes academic involvement is participatory action research (PAR), a predominantly social science research model that involves active participation with the individuals, communities, and organizations centered in the research process. PAR emphasizes collaboration between researchers and the people

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<sup>424</sup> Huber, *Climate Change as Class War*.

<sup>425</sup> Huber.; Huber, "Ecological Politics for the Working Class."

being studied, with the goal of creating social change or addressing a specific issue. PAR also seeks to empower participants by involving them in the identification of problems, data collection, analysis, and the development and implementation of solutions. Finally, PAR can create synergies, granting activists and academics opportunities neither would have had individually. For instance, researchers can lend activist efforts legitimacy in policy circles while activists can help break academic findings out of the ivory tower of peer-reviewed journals and into the public eye through news media connections.<sup>426</sup> Another approach, one that distances itself from the purview of academics, takes a page from Matthew Huber: an attempt to suture tenant organizing and other forms of community activism with labor organizing. The former rely primarily on moral pleas and policy work, but organized labor also possesses the cold, hard structural power that flows from strike threats and actual strikes.<sup>427</sup> This alliance would require political maneuvering and a skillful grasp of labor laws to implement effectively, but its appeal is immediately clear: workers also need comfortable, affordable places to live and good food to eat.

## Conclusion

After several months of delays, Block 216 officially opened on Halloween 2023. Mid-October journalistic coverage talked about a “ribbon-cutting event,” but the opening seemed to draw little fanfare and had no web presence of consequence.<sup>428</sup> Despite misleading developer claims about the city revenue, housing, and job benefits that will

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<sup>426</sup> Alatorre et al., “Fighting Anti-Homeless Laws through Participatory Action Research: Reflections from the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness’ Criminalization Study.”

<sup>427</sup> Huber, *Climate Change as Class War*.

<sup>428</sup> KGW Staff, “Portland Block 216 Tower Has New Opening Date.”

supposedly magnanimously flow from Block 216 and its luxury amenities that are beyond reach to most Portlanders, perhaps the closing line in the guarded first OpenTable review of Bellpine, the luxury restaurant on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor of Block 216 expresses the collective sentiment best: “[w]e really want them to thrive because PDX needs it.”<sup>429</sup> Chapter two of this thesis also offers speculations as to the long and short term economic viability of Block 216's irresponsible and ill-timed wager, alongside assessments on the developers' financial solvency. Recent economists' talk of a post-pandemic 'urban doom loop' that midsized cities are particularly vulnerable to is worthy of sober consideration; however, truthfully only time will tell what Block 216 will bring to Portland to replace what it so tragically took away.<sup>430</sup>

As I argue in chapter 1, Block 216 violently and traumatically uprooted one of Portland's most treasured landmarks and scattered it to the wind. The Alder Pod was not just the crown jewel in Portland's internationally-renown mobile food scene, it was a site of heterogeneous urban conviviality, beloved by tens of thousands of local cartivores, an empowering livelihood for hundreds of food cart vendors, and an incubator for the American Dream. In the time since June 2019, the ex-Alder carts with the assistance of Friends of the Green Loop has shown remarkable ingenuity and resolve in the face of insecurity during the long march from Alder Street to Ankeny Square. The battle over the Alder Pod was lost arguably before it was begun, but at least the battle over The Cart Blocks seems to have been won for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>429</sup> “Bellpine at The Ritz-Carlton Portland - Portland, OR on OpenTable.”

<sup>430</sup> Siegel, “How the ‘Urban Doom Loop’ Could Pose the next Economic Threat.”

But now is not the time for complacency. This single secondary battle has been hard-won, but the war rages on. As chapter three argues, without an interceding political force, the writing is on the wall for nearly all of Portland's historical city center food cart pods. Downtown land prices will continue to appreciate, and landowners will continue to mobilize for the profits that redevelopment provides. In several decades all that will be left are corporate food courtyards like the Midtown Beer Gardens, and even those have leases that expire. The outer-urban pods infused by the exodus will have an ambivalent reckoning with their role in gentrification. If business and governance continue as usual, the future of Portland's mobile food will be a sanitized quirk and charm turned inward and accessible only to the middle class and—even then—far away from the city center.

Finally, despite the foul play and deceit practiced by actors including BPM, BMO, CCP, and DDG, this argument is not a moral critique of a few bad apples playing the urban development and real estate game. After all, as chapter one demonstrates, if BPM had not built Block 216, another luxury development firm would have just done the same several years later and engaged in similar unscrupulous and predatory behavior. As the aphorism goes, “don't hate the player, hate the game.” In this instance, the nature of the game is political economy—a world system that prioritizes people over profit, where collectively generated bounties always flow up, where the regulatee's logic is shared by the regulators, and where the poor and marginalized are usually left with nothing. Thus Henri Lefebvre's right to the city becomes not merely a right of access to what property speculators, financiers, and state planners define as the rules of the game but must be “an

active right to make the city different, to shape [a] city based not only upon a different ordering of rights but upon different political-economic practices.”<sup>431</sup>

The overall picture is not a comforting one. If there is one significant glimmer of hope, it is that food cart owners love what they do and will fight up to and often even beyond their means to continue doing it. Most of the vendors I had the privilege of speaking with over the course of the study mentioned the good and the bad, groaned about the trials and griped about the tribulations endemic to their line of work; however, each and every one said that they would not change it for the world. Janice and Danny left their previous career as owners of a successful suburban Japanese restaurant to live the cart life on their own terms, “living free and with a free spirit.” Being boxed into a brick-and-mortar or food hall would defeat the purpose of the profession. Tucker, an ex-cart owner herself who only founded OMFA after a career-ending injury, put it best when she exclaimed near the end of our conversation that

everything we do is to ensure that the customer experiences food in a way that makes them mildly as passionate as we are about that same food. [...] The reality is that all of that is wrapped into this deep, deep desire you guys just love what we do. Like, not just love it, like *LOVE* what we do. So, from the public, we need on such a visceral level, we need you to keep coming, to bring your friends, tell the public, to blast it on social media, to walk back up when you're done eating your meal to our window and tell us how much you love food. And then come back and do it again. Because that's what we live for.<sup>432</sup>

As Tucker implies, where there are food carts, there is an army of seasoned and indignant cartivores waiting in the wings to defend the things they love—and the glimmerings of a potent cross-cutting coalition in the making.

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<sup>431</sup> Harvey, “The Right to the City.”

<sup>432</sup> Tucker, Interview with Leah Tucker from OMFA.

## Limitations

As mentioned in the introduction, I began conducting background research and interviews over summer 2023; however, the majority of my research and writing process was done between late August and mid-November 2023 while simultaneously grappling with the most demanding course schedule of my undergraduate years. According to an offhand comment from one of my professors, this final product approaches the length of his dissertation. While that maybe be impressive on some level, that is not best practice for an undergraduate thesis. Mark Twain allegedly said “if I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.” I could not agree more. I could have said everything I wanted to say with more brevity and precision given the time.

I was also unable to pursue a few threads due to lack of time. Firstly, I initially wanted to write a section exploring the tripartite relationship between mobile food, homelessness, and policing. I ultimately decided against doing so because it is an important, nuanced, and contentious issue that should either be done well or not at all, and I did not have the time to do it well. Part of the problem is that directly working with and interviewing homeless Portlanders was impossible considering my IRB timeframe. Working with vulnerable groups requires full board IRB approval. I began the IRB process during the summer break, and the full board does not meet then.

Secondly, I was considering grounding my work in the Marxian settler-colonial-studies framework of accumulation-via-dispossession and enclosure of the commons. The problem is that a privately-owned parking lot is not a commons in terms of anything but the civil libertarian vibes described in industry paeans like *Cartopia*. Moreover, some

recent Marxist scholarship in my view convincingly contends that the settler-colonial-studies' dispossession/enclosure framework is riddled with holes that go down to its basic ideological and analytical preconceptions. For instance, Jack Davies argues that, for settler-colonial-studies,

the problem with capitalism is, as it has always been, that it is predatory; and predation, on capitalism's own ideology of justice and fairness, is immoral. This moralism evaporates the analytic distinctions that would specify the settler colony and acquits its theorist of historical study. Even the firm and gritty matter of land, settler colonialism's 'irreducible element,' is airily abstracted into phenomenological standpoint theories and metaphysical assertions about the "logic of elimination." Such theory can only endlessly rediscover its own premises in new phenomena across all history: an interminable enclosure of infinite commons, a universal settler colony.<sup>433</sup>

Nevertheless, if settler-colonial-studies is inadequate, some other theoretical underpinning in Marxist political economy would have been valuable and far stronger than the tit-for-tat economic fact-checking present in chapter two.

Finally, I would have liked to write a subchapter on the ongoing Darcelle XV Plaza redevelopment plans, which Block 216's developers and Portland Clean & Safe are attempting to influence through backroom politics in numerous ways, so far with a great deal of success.<sup>434</sup> The end result will likely be an "fortified cell" of a plaza, mapping neatly onto the urban design class warfare paradigm established in the Fortress PDX subchapter. Unfortunately, the Darcelle XV Plaza redevelopment process, is rapidly evolving, highly complex, and opaque. Even if I had the time to cover it, doing so well is likely above my pay grade as a junior urbanist without direct access to the ongoing stakeholder meetings.

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<sup>433</sup> Davies, "The World Turned Outside In: Settler Colonial Studies and Political Economy."

<sup>434</sup> Bach, "Block 216 Rep: 'No Food Carts or Trucks' at Nearby Plaza, Email Reveals." I am the one who tipped off Jonathan Bach about these emails which I obtained through a public document request. I have made the emails publicly available here: <https://mega.nz/file/W7QoyJzZ#Zb9MUC-Htjlls7NODDAUWhtgBPbcTu82frUAw9BD7Y>

On the topic of methodology, I wish I had done a better job conducting interviews with Ex-Alder pod food cart owner-operators. The norm in mobile food scholarship is mentioning establishments and their proprietors by name. Evidently most owner-operators are proud of what they have built, the work they do, and wish to share both with the world. Still due to the underinformed and rushed nature of my IRB process, I must refer to vendors using pseudonyms and record data through written jottings instead of making complete audio transcripts. I also wish I had snowball sampled, which would have yielded more interviews than a round of cold calling/emailing followed by just showing up at food carts and introducing myself.

### Next Steps

I am very proud that this thesis might have some impact outside of the academic setting it was initially created for. Some of the journalists, city officials, and NGO members I pestered over the course of my research process have requested copies of my thesis. There is a small chance that my findings, conclusions, and recommendations might influence future mobile food policy in Portland and not only end up as a glorified museum piece on the Pomona College thesis website and line on my *curriculum vitae*. I offer these next steps with that responsibility in mind.

First, extensive work must be done to chart the relationships between mobile food and gentrification in Portland. This must encompass more than quasi-Bordieuan work on culinary *habitus* which underpins most of the existing literature. Any new approach must blend longitudinal quantitative measures of displacement and gentrification with qualitative ethnographic work with stakeholders including vendors and vulnerable



residents. Second, city planners must explore ways to open up public land for food carts, especially in the city center. The success of the Cart Blocks and Carts on the Square are respectively living proof that such a model is viable through either private-public partnerships or direct city management. As elaborated upon in the What is To Be Done? subchapter, Director's Park, the North Park Blocks, Jamison Square, and the Tom McCall Waterfront could all serve as locations for food carts on a temporary or permanent basis. This would likely require repealing non-compete rules that currently allow brick-and-mortar restaurants to NIMBY away mobile food under the mistaken assumption that they compete for business. Third, work should be done to assess the presence of food halls in Portland's culinary landscape since 2016. While Tucker along with four of the five vendors I spoke to argued that mobile food operators are cut from a different cloth than food hall restauraners, non-anecdotal research is needed. Besides, there are many anecdotal examples of food cart operators migrating to food halls and brick-and-mortar restaurants. For instance, Henry and Alice opened a food cart with the intention of moving into a food hall once their business kicked off. There are also examples of successful food cart operators diversifying into multiple locations, including both food carts and brick-and-mortars, as was the case with Juan's family-owned Mexican food business. It is also necessary to see what the customers think, namely ascertain the extent to which food halls mimic the experience of food cart pods/food courtyards in the eaters they attract.

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