

Portland as an Innovative City

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An innovative city is a city that can successfully attract and retain talent and companies, and then utilize that agglomeration of workers and firms to spur economic growth and innovative ideas. Although Portland is not usually seen as a “hot” creative city, it is laying the foundations necessary to attract members of the creative class. Three factors found within Portland that can make it an innovative city are: 1) its strong sustainability development, 2) the agglomerations of various design and technology firms, and 3) amenities to keep the workers happy and relaxed.

Portland is well known for its high sustainability practices. It is ranked number one in the United States in city innovation, energy, and knowledge base, which “reflect a deep-seated understanding of sustainable practice” (SustainLane, 2006). One example of Portland’s sustainability practices is the South Waterfront District, which is the largest green development project in the United States (South Waterfront, 2007). The entire neighborhood “uses innovative energy saving and water conservation techniques to minimize the neighborhood’s impact on the environment” (ibid). Another good example of Portland’s sustainable projects is the TriMet MAX Rail Line, which is an above-ground rail system that serves the Downtown core. This line allows creative workers to stay close to their place of work, limiting the effects of urban sprawl. These projects show that Portland is a hub for environmentally-friendly solutions and smart growth development, which in turn appeals to the creative class.

Portland has a growing, multi-disciplinary agglomeration of differing talent and firms. Wieden + Kennedy, for instance, is one of the largest independently-owned advertising firms in the United States, and has done a lot of work for Nike (which has its headquarters in Portland). The networking between these two technology companies

allowed for innovative ideas to form – Nike’s “Just Do It” campaign was born from this relationship (Soloman, 1998). Agglomerations of forward-thinking design and technology companies allow for successful idea generation, which can appeal to talent and other companies.

Agglomerations do not always lead to innovation, though. An agglomeration alone “does not automatically lead to innovations, but it can boost innovation activities” (Kolehmainen, p.7). In order for these networks to foster innovation, the work environment must cater to the needs for quality of life by the creative class (Florida, p.82). Creative class workers work hard, and they need outlets to relieve the stress they accumulate throughout their workweek. Portland caters to this need through its Pearl District. The Pearl District is a neighborhood of former warehouses that were repurposed by architects, artists, entrepreneurs, and business-owners, into art galleries, shops, restaurants, and parks (History of the Pearl, 2007). These readily available amenities help relieve the creative workers from their stress. It also fosters the type of environment that, when combined with the social and work-related networking made possible by agglomerations, is conducive to the generation of innovative ideas.

Portland is not an innovative city at the moment, but it is laying the foundations for it to become one for in the future. The three main factors that contribute to their bid as an innovative city are: 1) its sustainability development, which allow for growth and prevent urban sprawl, 2) its agglomerations of design and technology firms that foster a creative work environment, and 3) the amenities that allow creative workers to relax from the stressful work environment. These factors are what make Portland a hot, up-and-coming city, and what draw talent from all over the world to Portland.

References

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