

Great Public Spaces

Pioneer Courthouse Square

701 S.W. Sixth Avenue
Portland, OR

Contributed by Project for Public Spaces, www.pps.org

Located in the heart of downtown, "Portland's living room" has a prominent civic role as a place for public enjoyment.



Why It Works

Pioneer Courthouse Square has been called "Portland's living room" in reference to its enhanced civic role as a place for the public to gather in and use. Its modern design includes public art, amenities, flowers, trees, walls and stairs designed for sitting on. It is the scene of frequent events, and includes a coffee shop, food vendors, and the information center for Tri-Met (regional Portland's transit agency), which was the key agent of the square's successful redevelopment.

The square's modern design incorporates public art, flowers, trees, walls and ample stairs that do double-duty as seating areas. It is the scene of frequent events, enhanced by a coffee shop and food vendors, and also serves as a hub for buses and light rail.

Pioneer Courthouse Square is one of the first in a new generation of public squares. No longer just passive green spaces, these squares are designed to be programmed and used by the public. In fact, the infrastructure for such uses is built-in, and the spaces have management entities in charge of them to assure their ongoing effective use. The process of creating Pioneer Courthouse Square - the public debates, the fundraising, the grand opening - was designed to involve Portland's residents. Funding and vision from Tri-Met linked people to the square and downtown as a whole.

With an effective management organization in place, the square has become the city's place of pride and a focal point for all kinds of community activities. The revitalization of the downtown is testimony to the square's profound impact on the livability of Portland.

History & Background

The creation of this much-loved public space in downtown Portland cannot be separated from the fundamental role played by Tri-Met, the city's transit agency. Planned concurrently with the new Metropolitan Area Express (MAX) light rail system, Pioneer Square was an idea that dated back to the 1950's, when the site was a parking lot. Tri-Met leveraged its funding for transit stops and an information center and helped to make the Square financially possible.

With extraordinary public support, the Square was built to be "Portland's living room," a center for the life of the city. Funded in part by the residents of Portland, the Square has continued its tradition of citizen participation with thousands of community events held over the past decade. With the opening of the light rail system in 1986, Pioneer Courthouse Square became both the city center and the bustling hub of transit for buses and light rail, as well as the main information center for Tri-Met.