

Is the Irvington Historic District Really Racist? And Other Questions

Testimony to the Planning and Sustainability Commission by Jim Heuer

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Members of the YIMBY movement have adopted the agitprop meme that historic preservation in general and historic districts in particular are “Racist”. It appears that by endless repetition, they have begun to make this assertion “true” for many folks – especially in this time when the Black Lives Matter movement has impelled Americans around the country to take a close look at our racist past.

But social-media driven memes don’t constitute serious discussion about this consequential issue. In fact, there is a big risk that by shutting down discussion, they prevent us from addressing the real challenges surfaced by greater awareness of institutionalized racism and how it has shaped our cities. This comment is aimed at the Planning community as well as the Preservation community.

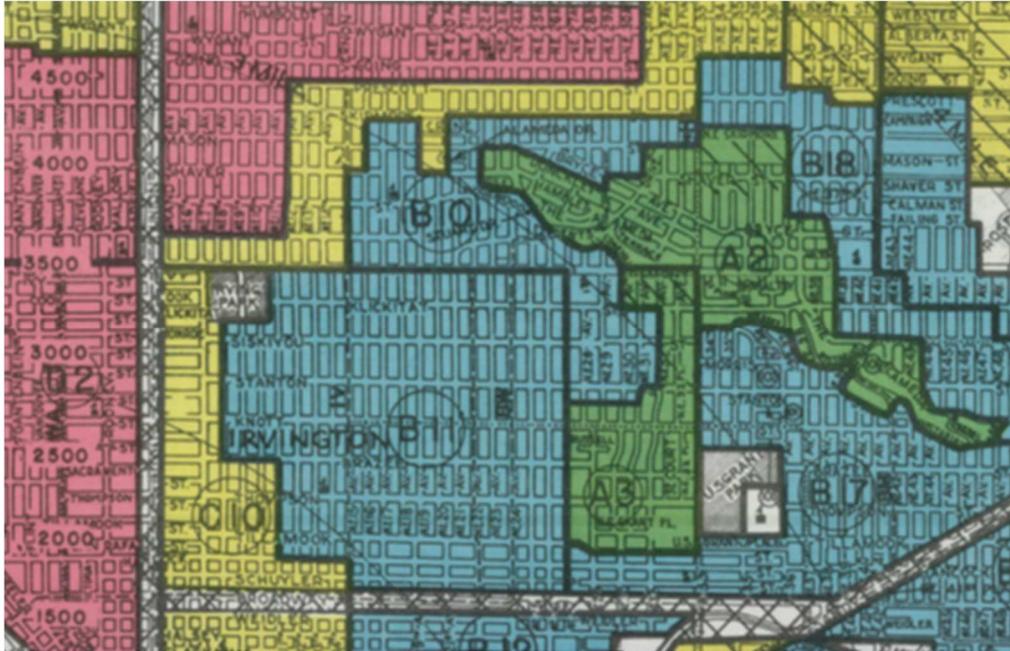
What about Irvington?

A website maintained by an ardently YIMBY group has called out Irvington as a prime example of a historic district that has “derived their historic status from racist zoning and private covenants”. The real story of Irvington is much more complex, and presents a powerful story of community resilience and change:

- Irvington did have deed covenants north of Tillamook Street starting in 1891 and expiring in 1916. These covenants mentioned race only in the context of Chinese, who were, at that time, subject to the Federal Exclusion Acts of 1872. But by far the more important to those middle and upper-middle class buyers was the prohibition in the covenants of three types of uses that had proven so detrimental elsewhere in the city: taverns, gambling halls, and horse stables (with their bad smells and filth). Also important was the requirement for a 25 foot setback from the street specifically aimed at allowing home owners to display the gardens that Portland's moist, temperate climate made possible.
- Nevertheless, covenants only affected part of what is now Irvington. Altogether 65% of all houses and buildings built in Irvington were constructed either after the covenants expired or in areas that never had covenants. This is why we find multi-family housing from the 1920s along 15th Avenue and other streets on single family zoned lots closer to the early streetcar lines.
- In its earliest development, Irvington was not a particularly high-class neighborhood. Modest Victorian cottages were the norm, and were home to railroad workers from the Albina yards who had saved up a little money. Then, in 1893, calamity struck, and nearly all construction throughout the City halted. Irvington still has a legacy of beautifully preserved Victorian era cottages, that survived the economically desperate times in the 1890s and again in the 1930s.
- While it is true that in the period from about 1905 through 1914 (when World War I brought construction to a halt) Irvington attracted high-end buyers, some of whom built what were the most expensive homes in the City at the time. But with the end of WW I, the automobile was adopted by upper class residents who used the mobility to move to swanker neighborhoods like Dunthorpe and Lake Oswego, leaving Irvington to middle and working-class buyers for whom

the frequent streetcar service was a major draw. This is seen in the smaller sizes of homes built in Irvington in the 1920s through the 1940s.

- As early as 1938 when the Home Owners' Loan Corporation published its notorious maps that are regarded as the earliest example of red-lining, Irvington was clearly not in the "green" or "low risk" category, with substantial sections in the "yellow" area:



In the map above, the C10 and B11 sections cover Irvington. The yellow in C10 is described as "Third Grade", suggesting poor risk for lenders. While it is believed that even in the red Fourth Grade areas, banks were willing to lend at this time, they charged higher interest, making the lower income residents even less likely to be able to afford mortgages or home improvement loans.

- It is interesting that a case has been made that the single-family zoning which applied to much of this area after the mid-1920s was racially motivated -- intended to keep out African Americans. If that were true, then as this map suggests, and subsequent history would show, the zoning was a failure. By the 1960s realtors were telling white buyers (as reported in *The Oregonian*) that it was not safe to buy a house west of 33rd Avenue because of the high proportion of African Americans living in Irvington. Black families displaced from Vanport by the 1948 flood had sought housing in traditionally Black Albina neighborhoods, and when those became too crowded, found refuge in the large, relatively inexpensive single-family houses and apartments in Irvington to the east. By 1970, 43% of the population of Irvington west of 15th Avenue was Black according to census figures.
- By the 1950s and 1960s, redlining was firmly in place west of 15th Avenue, and loans and property insurance were also difficult to obtain, for buyers of any race, in Irvington east of 15th Avenue. Single family zoning had no role to play in this. The banks and real estate industry officially and unofficially cooperated to enforce these restrictions.

- By the middle of the 1960s, Black and white residents of Irvington banded together to seek solutions to racial unrest and proposed demolitions of the many abandoned properties that dotted the neighborhood. This resulted in the formation of the biracial Irvington Community Association in 1966, which advocated for preservation rather than demolition and a program of recreational opportunities for youth centered in Irving Park.
- Long before any historic designation of Irvington, the percentage of black population began to decline in Irvington. Portland's land use policies, changing tastes in living arrangements, and other factors began drawing professional and managerial class buyers back into the inner city, driving up rents and purchase prices. By 2000, the percentage of Black residents in Irvington west of 15th Avenue had dropped to 20%. By that time, the City had designated about 2/3rds of the Irvington Neighborhood a Historic Conservation District – along with other parts of the historically Black Albina area of the city. The other districts included Eliot, Piedmont, Mississippi, and Woodlawn. While this designation probably helped stabilize these communities and demonstrated the City's commitment not to "urban renew" them out of existence, it had two major flaws: contributing buildings in these areas were not eligible for either Federal or State of Oregon historic rehabilitation tax breaks, and demolitions were allowed with just 120-day delay and very limited notice. City officials congratulated themselves on these designations, claiming that one day these districts would "grow up" to be National Register Districts – of course no funding was ever provided to them by the City to make this expensive transition.
- After 2000, with accelerating property values in both single and multi-family zones, and in and outside of the Historic Conservation Districts, the percentage of Black residents not only in Irvington, but throughout North and Northeast Portland continued to fall. By one estimate, over 20,000 Black residents were displaced by this process in the years after 1990. Today it is believed that the percentage of Black residents in Irvington is close to the Portland average.
- In 2010, after a number of well-publicized demolitions of historic buildings in the Irvington Historic Conservation District, the Irvington Community Association launched a multi-year campaign to explore the potential for a National Register Historic District. By this time the Ladd's Addition Historic Conservation District had already made this transition and properties there had started to benefit from the State of Oregon Special Assessment tax program. Also, there were still many Irvington properties that might potentially benefit from tax benefits to encourage rehabilitation. The ICA then began a multi-year effort involving raising funds from a neighborhood home tour, engaging a consultant, recruiting scores of volunteers from around the neighborhood, extensive outreach to the community, and notices to every property owner in the District. The District was designated in October, 2010, with only about 100 letters of objection to the process out of approximately 4000 eligible property owners.

In summary, while Irvington began with a dream of a "high class residential district" exclusively for a wealthy clientele, it was quickly buffeted by economic and technological changes. The overarching story of Irvington is resilience in the face of change, and a commitment to protect Irvington as a great place to live. Today, Black families and other People of Color (including one of the District's Representatives in the Oregon Legislature) continue to own and rent homes and raise their families in Irvington. The Irvington Grade School student body is approximately 34% People of Color including 20% Black.

But What about Other Historic Districts?

In the years since the Goal 5 Rules were changed in 2017, one fairly large National Register Historic District has cleared the many hurdles for Federal recognition: Laurelhurst.

As it turns out Laurelhurst is one of many planned streetcar neighborhoods from the early 20th Century which had restrictive covenants attached their deeds, many, but not all, of which had barriers to African American or Chinese ownership. Some remained in effect long after the Irvington covenants had expired. All such covenants were officially invalidated by the courts in 1948, even if they had not expired. The Laurelhurst Neighborhood Association's website tells this story with no punches pulled here:

<https://www.laurelhurstpdx.org/history>

But what do 100-year-old expired and invalidated covenants say about today's residents and their motivations for supporting historic districts for their neighborhoods? I cannot speak for those residents; their neighborhood histories are different from Irvington's. I do know, however, that during the discussion about the Laurelhurst District, I attended several meetings and delivered presentations to hundreds of neighborhood residents. In my remarks, it was made clear that change was coming and that the Residential Infill Project would ultimately expand the uses allowed for all buildings in the district. The result might well be changes in the economic profile of residents and certainly would involve increased population density. It was made clear that RIP would affect whatever replacements might be built on the site of the roughly 25% of the buildings in the district that were classed as non-contributing. Never was there a suggestion that the objective of the district was to block change, only to moderate it and avoid the McMansionization of the neighborhood, which only made inner Portland more expensive.

OK, So What are the Other Things We Should be Talking About?

There are still serious issues of equity in Portland's policies for historic designation, some, but not all of which are addressed in HRCF. Some of the big concerns:

- City government has largely abdicated its role in identifying historic districts, a policy extended and made worse in the HRCF proposal. This has meant (and could continue to mean) that affluent neighborhoods that can afford to hire the consultants to make their case for National Register listing will continue to be able to act, while residents of perhaps more worthy historic neighborhoods with less affluent residents are ignored and powerless. A clear mechanism by which the Landmarks Commission working with historic preservation staff from the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability can evaluate the clusters of historic resources in a much expanded Historic Resources Inventory as candidates for Historic District or Conservation District status. Then there needs to be a process to pursue the process of district designation without a financial burden placed on the property owners affected – including a well-defined mechanism for meeting the Goal 5 Rule requirement for 50% + 1 approval.
- The City has failed to lobby the State of Oregon legislature to extend the Special Assessment tax benefits to contributing properties in Historic Conservation Districts. These districts still have significant numbers of African American property owners who might well benefit from such a program or, better yet, a tax credit program. (Alas, the State has failed to adopt such a credit year after year.) In 2019, there was yet another an opportunity to extend the Special Assessment to locally designated districts when the enabling legislation was renewed. The City

of Portland sat mute on this, despite the efforts of preservationists to bring it up... The State Historic Preservation Office absurdly blamed bureaucratic overload for their refusal to include such a provision in the extension legislation, and the statute as renewed applies only to National Register listed resources.

- The City insisted on lumping the huge grab bag of historic preservation issues into one, enormous and confusing package requiring years for drafting and review. This has delayed the implementation of simple changes that could have been enacted quickly and non-controversially soon after the new Goal 5 Rules were announced. Specifically, this relates to the clarification of how the historic resources inventory can work and allow buildings to be listed as “significant” but without designation and then be protected with 120-day demolition delay. During these last several years, the City was surely aware of the landmark Multiple Property Nomination to the National Register: African American Resources in Portland, Oregon, from 1865 to 1973, which was listed on the Register in December, 2019, but was under way for a number of years. No urgency was evidenced to list and protect these resources as they were identified.

This nomination identified scores of buildings and places significant to the African American experience in Portland, many of which are suggested to be potentially eligible for individual listing on the National Register and should have immediately been added to the City’s Historic Resources Inventory. Unfortunately, the City busied itself with this monumental code revision package. The result has been that there has been NO effort to list these identified resources on the Inventory – with the consequence that at least three of these buildings have already been pre-emptively demolished. These were among the very first houses in Portland built by and for African American residents, and had to have been worthy of preservation and possibly individual National Register listing.

- The City has ignored opportunities for telling African American and other stories of People of Color in places where the physical buildings have been lost, but where memories remain strong and deep. There is no formal City program or budget for posting durable plaques or other long-lasting forms of story-telling, with the result that private organizations have had to pick up the slack. An example is the exhibit at the Golden West Hotel that tells some of its story to passers-by and is maintained by the Oregon Black Pioneers. A similar opportunity exists at a related property nearby: Portland Union Station. An imposing bronze plaque on the building commemorates the architects and builders of the building, but there is nothing whatever to tell the story of the thriving Black community that grew up around the Station in the late 19th Century when the railroads were among the few employers offering Black employees a living wage.

The above is just a sampling. The time of this Planning and Sustainability Commission (and the Historic Landmarks Commission) might well be better spent exploring these and other examples of how the City should “step up its game” in telling under-represented stories, rather than parsing code language to remove historic designations from resources already protected. Folks, this is NOT a zero sum game. We should be looking forward, to how our expanded understanding of what “history” to record and celebrate can be turned into meaningful Portland City action.

About the Writer

My name is Jim Heuer. The home that my husband Robert Mercer and I own is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places and a contributing property in the Irvington Historic District. In 2001 we applied for the State of Oregon Special Assessment, which gave us a 15-year tax break in return for an expenditure of many tens of thousands of dollars for rehabilitation and restoration. Then in 2017, in part to help pay for our much higher property taxes after the end of the Special Assessment break, we constructed a 750 square foot Accessory Dwelling Unit in our basement – during which we applied for a Type II Historic Resource Review.

In addition to “hands-on” preservation activities, my involvement with the historic preservation community includes:

- Lecturer on Portland architectural history for the Architectural Heritage Center (AHC)
- Past membership on the Board of Directors of the AHC
- Membership on the Irvington Community Association Land Use Committee during which time we reviewed approximately 600 historic resource review applications and assisted hundreds our neighbors navigate the process
- Twenty year member of the Irvington Community Association’s Historic Home Tour Committee
- Past Chairperson of the Portland Coalition for Historic Resources
- Member of the Regulatory Advisory Committee for the re-write of the Goal 5 rules
- Member of Senator Dembrow’s 2019 legislative task force on historic preservation
- Member of the Architectural Historic Center’s Education and Advocacy Committees
- Docent with Robert Mercer for history and architecture walking tours of Irvington, Ladd’s Addition, Portland Heights, Willamette Heights, and other historic Portland neighborhoods

Note that reference above to organizations I have served is for general information only to explain my interest in and qualification for submitting this testimony. The ideas expressed in this document are mine alone, and there is no intent to suggest support by any of these organizations of anything I have written.