

was a master stroke by Mayor Willis Van Dusen. In a discussion about the park's future, impassioned citizens clearly delineated Coxcomb Hill's assets. It was heartening to hear both poetic and practical discussions on the virtue of Astoria's greatest outdoor space — a park where locals and visitors share public art and awe-inspiring views.

Much of the goodwill generated during the plan's formation was lost, however, when the City Council failed to adopt it as an authoritative directive. Today, the master plan is a guideline, nothing more. Neither the city or the Friends are obligated to follow it verbatim. They are free to interpret or pick and choose what suits them. In turn they have needlessly angered the public, feeding both uncertainty in the project and a distrust of those involved.

When the proposed interpretive center was unveiled, it was evident the Friends were blinded by the strength of their convictions. Guidelines were stretched and suspicions were raised again over the Friends' sincerity to follow public input. The master plan recommended a 1,500 squarefoot building footprint constructed above ground on the site of the existing caretaker's house. As now proposed, the interpretive center is 4,500 feet.

It is also located in the "red zone," an area the public bluntly stated was to be preserved for its views and prime parking locations. The cleverly submerged visitor center does not technically block views, but it does rob the best view from legions of people who park their cars facing west and view the sunset — a simple pleasure now lost to "improvements."

The Friends will have a tough time winning this quagmire because sometimes the plan is too schematic. The freshly laid plaza around the Column is an example. The Astoria Column was originally designed as if it were a garden folly, where a monumental piece of architectural antiquity is contrasted with plantings or a natural landscape. Modest paved areas, as originally constructed, did not detract from the artistic tension between the Column's form and artwork, and that of the surrounding vegetation. The master plan recommended alteration to this scheme, but the result may not have been anticipated.

Now, a hard-surface stretches broadly from the base of the Column. The oval around the monument is more narrow to accommodate diagonal parking. The mound the Column stands on is lower, closer to street level to accommodate wheelchair access to the plaza. The result is that the Astoria Column and surrounding vegetation appear incidental to the parking lot.

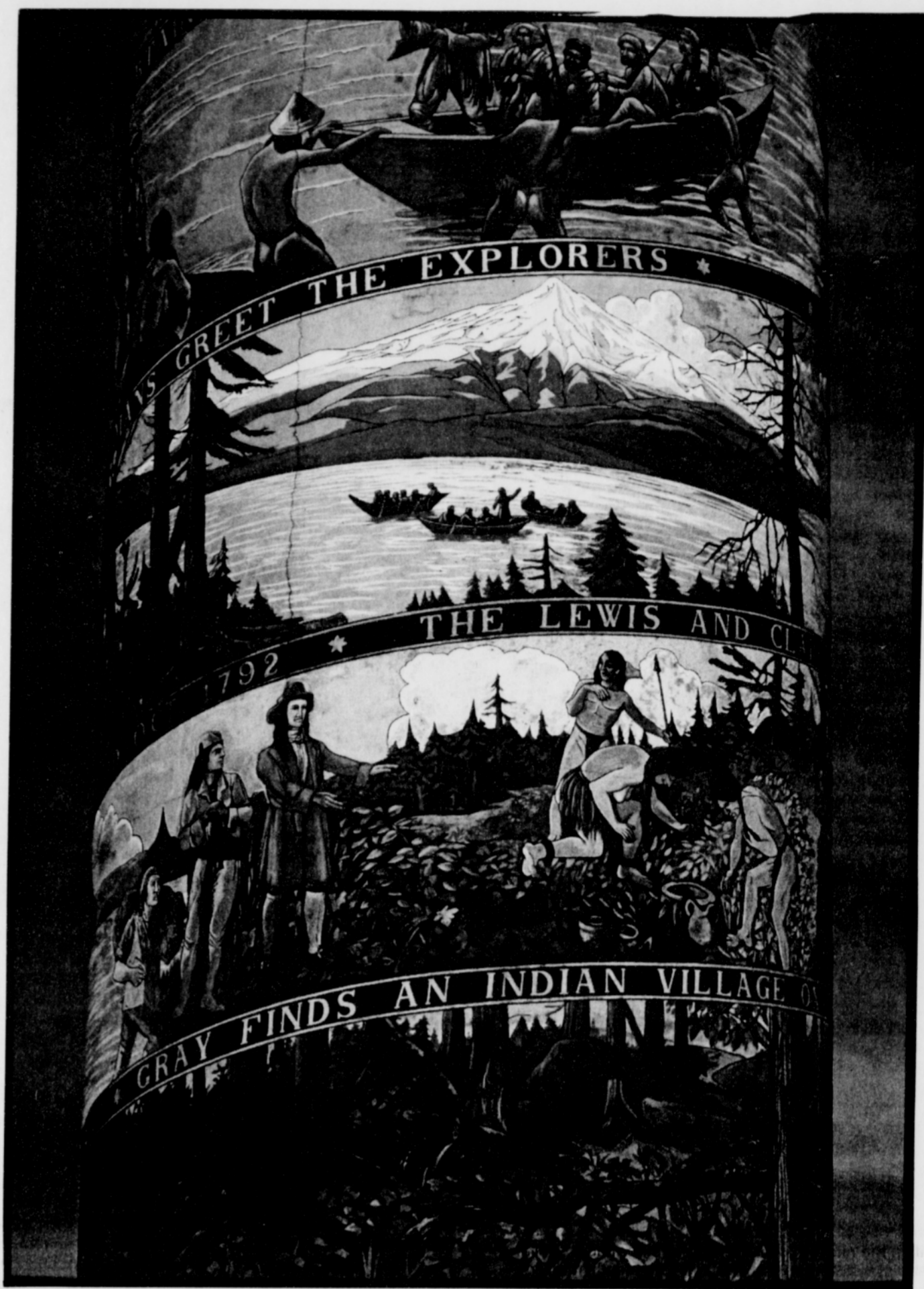
But these are details. The master plan wrestled with a much larger issue — and it did it rather well. It attempted to understand and regulate the impact of overcrowding a hilltop park with increased activities on a confined greenspace. Thanks to an unenforceable plan, the park's fate is less assured. But there are some certainties.

First, without strong leadership, we stand to lose more than we will gain. It is important to remember the concept to build an interpretive center was not initiated through broad public concern. The need was internally developed and is maintained by the city. Therefore, the city needs to take the lead and provide the public with better security.

Second, submerged or not, the interpretive center's presence will forever change the site — no matter how much money is thrown on Coxcomb Hill or how much political pressure is exerted to alter it. The Astoria Column was designed as an esthetic experience. Its images pay homage to explorers, pioneers and indigenous people. In an attempt to further interpret history, a visitor's center — by paving and crowding the site — further removes the visitor from a historic context and ultimately diminishes the site on both an esthetic and academic level.

This is not good stewardship for future generations. Coxcomb Hill will be less sublime and less reflective. In an attempt to explain everything, we will lose much of what can only be experienced first-hand.

There may not be a happy ending to this mess. The city has virtually handed the reins to the Friends. It is up to them to act in good faith and extend goodwill. The Friends could start by truly listening to the frustrated public, being less sure of their convictions and being willing to treat Coxcomb Hill less like a corporate takeover and more like a community endeavor.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAT JENSEN

PILLAR & PARK

BY LESLIE MILLER

The topic of the pillar and development of the city park located on Coxcomb Hill is of some significance. It isn't just a matter of historic integrity, but a broad consideration of comprehensive land use planning. This consists of an overlay map that divides the confines of Astoria into areas of defined uses.

Traditionally, residential use is of less intensity than commercial use. Commercial use is of less intensity than industrial use. This pyramid is designed to protect the undeveloped and residential areas. Commercial developments are not generally allowed adjacent to, or within parks and residential areas. Residential zones are protected from the sheer volume of commercial traffic and congestion. Exceptions may be granted through a conditional use permit.

My experience with developers is they are not necessarily dissuaded from investment because of zoning requirements or historic designation. The most important thing seems to be predictability. If I invest in the zone, is everyone held to the same standard? How consistent is the city in regard to enforcement?

Like the city parks in Alderbrook and by the Peter Pan Market, the one on Coxcomb Hill is zoned for low intensity use in an institutional zone. In order to allow a visitors center in the park, the developer would apply for a high intensity conditional use permit. The planning commission would most likely hold a public hearing for such an exception to local zoning regulations.

Oddly enough, one of the few allowed uses in a city park specifies a caretaker's cottage, according to the local zoning ordinance. A demolition permit must be applied for prior to its destruction.

The overall objective of comprehensive planning is to eliminate the impact of high intensity use on the existing neighborhoods and undeveloped land adjoining these parks. Certainly any plan that would develop a tourist center near the Astoria Column violates the comprehensive plan, which is not to encourage high intensity impact, but to mitigate it.

Any other party that wanted to demolish or replace historical artifacts would be required to file for a demolition permit and site design review before the Astoria Landmarks Commission. This would start with a design for a proposed visitors center near the Astoria Column, including parking, landscaping and lighting. In this case, it seems all of these amenities are being constructed in advance of the city having chosen a specific site for a proposed visitors center. Isn't this "reverse planning"?

The pillar and the park belong to the citizens of Astoria, not to the small fry on the City Council or the big fish from Portland. There has been no election to foot the expense. The city seems politically and institutionally biased toward a commercial development next to a residential area at an unspecified location within John Jacob Astor Park, ignoring much public dissent. The

city seems involved in a process and outcome for which there is no decision. Would the city please designate a place for a visitors center before the caretaker's cottage is demolished and any more work is done?

What is happening isn't just a matter of historic preservation. The elegant simplicity of the park and awe-striking view are not the least of the values at stake. The park has always been free of charge, both to locals and pilgrims. I wish the city would keep it a free place to go and that it quit its reliance on anti-planning as policy.

I have spoken to a number of local residents about the extensive development of Coxcomb Hill and areas adjacent to the Astoria Column. Most feel the Column is self-explanatory, and that there is no need or desire for an interpretive center.

Regardless of how many times overwhelming opposition is expressed, the "Friends" of the Astoria Column, well-funded and persistent, are bent on grandiose plans. If development is howled down 10 times, this group would try the 11th. Once alterations are approved, Astoria would be stuck with the results permanently.

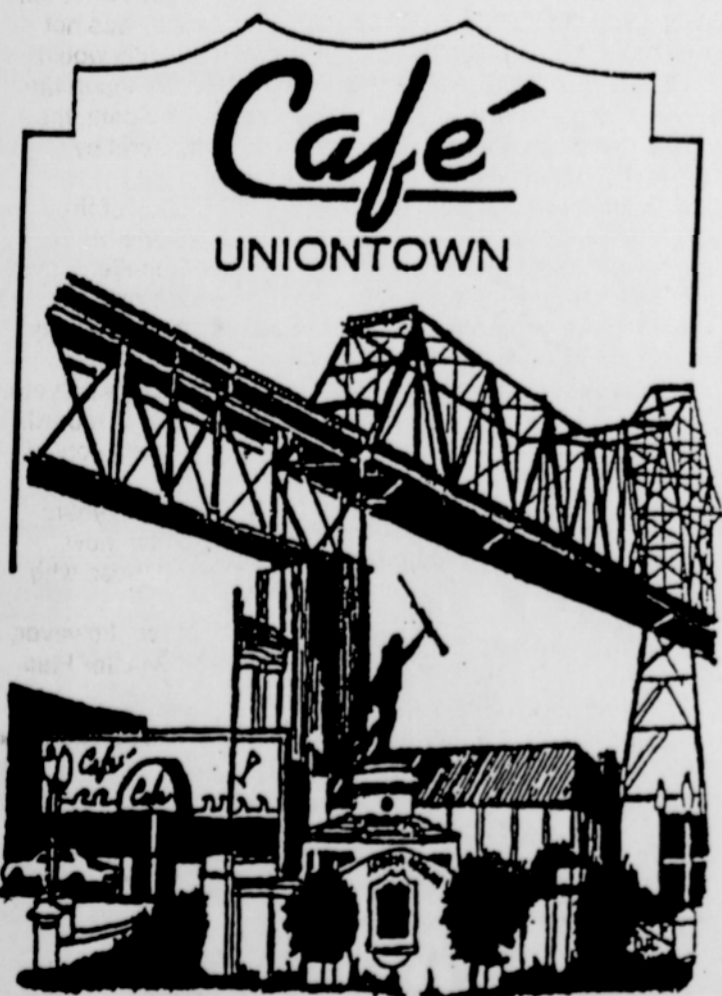
It looks like the City Council and the "Friends" suffer from identity confusion, as if the city and this group are one and the same. Plans and policies can be commingled and pre-approved without the site design required of any other applicant. Although board members may be appointed by the Mayor (a curious arrangement that serves to blur boundaries and tempts conflict of interest between private and public organizations), this does not mean the two are indistinguishable. The fact is that the "Friends" are separate from the elected City Council. What document defines this relationship?

"I have written a letter to the Astoria Landmarks Commission concerning the caretaker's cottage."

According to the City of Astoria Development Code, Section 6.080, Demolition & Moving, "No person, firm, or corporation shall move, demolish, or cause to be demolished any structure listed or identified as a Historic Landmark or as a Primary or Secondary without first obtaining a Certificate of Appropriateness. In obtaining a Certificate of Appropriateness, the applicant shall file an application on a form provided for that purpose with the Community Development Department."

Section 6.090, Administrative Procedures, Part A, specifies that "The Historic Landmarks Commission will follow the procedural requirements set forth in Article 9 with regard to application, public notice, quasi-judicial public hearing procedure, appeals, action on application, filing fees, and additional costs."

I believe that if the Caretaker's Cottage on Coxcomb Hill is destroyed without the above steps, the City will be in violation of its own Development Code, since there has been no application for a Certificate of Appropriateness, no findings of fact by your commission, and no public hearing, specifically in regard to this structure. I hereby respectfully request that the City comply with its own regulations.



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