

BARBARA MOSSBERG
PHOTO BY JACK LIU



Designing a Waterfront Town

A **VISIONARY PROFESSOR** WANTS TO HELP EUGENE FIND ITS RIVER AGAIN By Blake Andrews

Poet, playwright and scholar Barbara Mossberg was humanities and American studies professor at the University of Oregon from 1976 to 1988 before taking on academic leadership roles in national, federal and international appointments. She's traveled to more than 25 countries, including two Fulbright years in Scandinavia. She is past president of Goddard College in Vermont and past vice president of the Emily Dickinson International Society.

In 2013 she returned to Eugene as professor of practice at UO Clark Honors College, teaching interdisciplinary courses in eco-literature and "the green imagination," Einstein, "revolutionary imagination," creativity, and other "wild" thinking that changed the world.

We asked her what drew her back to Eugene and what keeps her here.

What physical changes locally were most obvious to you upon your return to Eugene?

First, let me say what did *not* change and always brought me back and made me want to keep this my permanent home: the sound of the train horn, which connects me to the whole community when I hear it.

Pre's Trail and its upkeep. Our train station right here. Hult Center. Tsunami programs and used bookstore. Hendricks Park. Spencer Butte. Rose Garden. Amazon Park. Public library. Whiteaker neighborhood.

And one of the most beautiful unspoiled rivers in the world. The more I have traveled, the more I see how extraordinary this is for us.

Some changes I have been saddened and confused by (but see as fixable): lack of maintenance in our signature spaces such as the restrooms in Hendricks Park. Our outstanding parks and natural spaces are our DNA. I regret the closed boathouse and no more boat rides on the millrace, which may be on verge of stagnation.

But most of all, I regret the dispiriting semi-high-rise buildings that seem so greatly out of keeping with Eugene history and its character of environmental beauty.

The city's riverfront area is slated for two major redevelopments: the EWEB property and the University of Oregon's riverfront parcels. What are your thoughts?

I see tremendous possibility and opportunity in these sites, as signatures of the spirit of Eugene going forward. Most cities do not have such a beautiful, large, wild river as our Willamette. The cities that do have rivers have made them transformational centerpieces of their revived culture and civic identity.

I would like to see a continuous railed riverbank walk including walkouts and benches right on the water, outdoor and terraced places to eat, places for music and performance and artwork.

The university has canal and river access, and I see buildings and walkways fronting these, rather than wasting this incredible resource with canals facing building backsides, alongside parking lots. I see fountains.

The EWEB property is a tremendous opportunity to utilize a great and unusual architectural space with a combination art gallery, performance space, food court,

art studios, film viewing center, conference center.

On fine days, I see a large part of our population out and about, as we're known for, with new daily customs and habits of "Track Town USA," walking and partaking in the riverside culture. We could connect the paths we do have in a system of bridges, overpasses, walkways. Perhaps an overhead tram could take people from downtown to the Oakway area, Valley River and Glenwood. The EWEB building could be the center.

The general objective in all these earnest and heartfelt imaginings is to make the river visible and experienced both from afar and up close, a vibrant part of our community's daily life.

What are your general impressions and expectations for Eugene's other waterways, including the millrace, Amazon Creek and the Glenwood shore?

I have the most wonderful memories of boating down the millrace, passing (and crashing into) ripe blackberry bushes. I see myself wearing a large hat and a striped Matisse-type dress placidly and ecstatically going down our millrace again with a picnic basket.

When I am in what we think of as exalted places, like Oxford, with its thriving punting culture, or Amsterdam or Venice, I think of the blessing of our *own* millrace; it is as naturally beautiful as Oxford's iconic Isis, and we once again can have boats in our city-wide canals.

We already have this infrastructure in place — how many cities can say this? — that can create new scenic charm and character for the city, leveraging the riverside theme, with places alongside to sit, including food stands.

I see Amazon Creek in this context. It is a tremendous asset as part of our water-connected ways. Similarly, I see work for Glenwood, and I imagine it will increase people's access to the major river, with a continuous riverbank walkway and extensions from Glenwood to the EWEB building that allow people to overlook the river, and ways to slow down a drive by the river.

I have often reflected that Eugene has a more beautiful river than most cities famous for their river cultures — Dublin, Paris, London and Oxford, for example, where I lead study abroad trips to examine what civic values go into architecture that distinguishes a place's culture.

Yet their rivers are epicenters of their beauty, the heart of the major cities around the world. In the U.S., cities ranging from San Antonio, New York City (and its Hudson communities), Charleston (SC), Marietta (GA), to even our local neighbors Bend, Ashland, Salem, Portland and Seattle, are in process and have been transformed by riverfront developments. Studies and polls for the most desirable places to live and visit feature cities that are built around a riverside culture. And in my opinion we have the most shining lively river!

What is your favorite place in the downtown area to spend time?

I remember being in Kesey Square watching a production one summer night of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. It was a wonderful community experience of "our town."

I can see this space used for artistic productions and food courts. I love the park/fountain area off Broadway. It is the combination of good food to eat and a place to eat it, with art, music, fountains, flowerbeds and tall trees.

I think of what Portland did with its 1.5 percent tax on new buildings to fund public art, so that the streets in Portland's downtown are not only a destination to enjoy in and of themselves, but a reminder with sculpture and fountains and other art that distinguish the city's environment and history of what was here before it was paved.

Portland deliberately re-introduced beloved elements of our past (trolley, cobblestones, river bank access) and integrated them with a rich tapestry of designer fountains and buildings as a way to look and wonder while we walk