Historic District Conservation Study: India Street Neighborhood Plan for a Future Portland, Maine, U.S.A

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ABSTRACT. *India Street is a fascinating 19-block neighborhood right next to the Old Port district, which is the economy and cultural center of Portland, Maine. Though not as busy as the Old Port district, India Street neighborhood is still a lively self-contained district which attracts a growly number of people moving into and becomes more and more popular nowadays. With lots of eyes looking at, the development of India Street generally becomes a hot topic among the public, the residents, the government and the developer, as well as historic preservation advocators. Where would this vibrant neighborhood, which has been facing transactions constantly since the first built, go to and would it be a decent direction? In the following paragraphs, these questions will be discussed through different aspects. An 'absolutely right' answer may not be reached but hope that the whole process will be inspiring for any other historic district preservation cases.*

KEYWORDS: *Historic District, Conservation,India Street Neighborhood*

1. Introduction

Portland is a city in the state of Maine, set on a peninsula extending into Casco Bay. Portland in Maine, once relays on its waterfront feature for development, is a destination that attracts tourists for abundant historic heritages and lovely waterfront view.

Figure. 1 Map shows the location of India Street Neighborhood

The Old Port district is the economy and culture center of Portland. With huge housing need, India Street neighborhood, which is right next to the Old Port district at the east side, becomes a hot target for the developers.
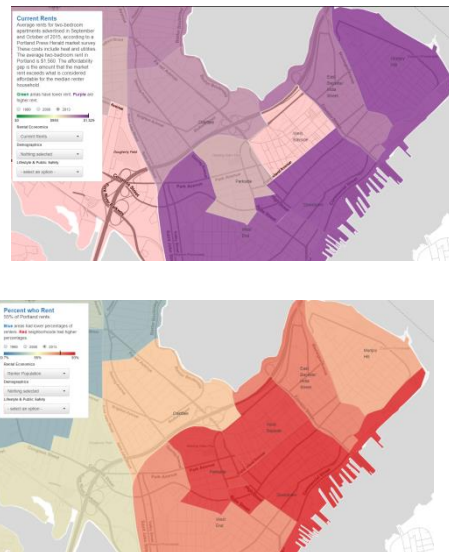

Figure. 2 Diagrams shows the current rent and rent percentage in India Street neighborhood and adjacent area[i][1]

The India Street neighborhood as we know it today encompasses a 19-block area, extending west to east from Franklin Arterial to Washington Avenue/Montfort Street

and north to south from Congress Street to Commercial Street.[2] The developers from the waterfront and Old Port district have brought their money and enthusiasm of large-scale commercial and real estate development plan into India Street neighborhood because of its convenient location adjacent to Old Port and the waterfront and its long residential history background. With a historic background of immigrant culture and small local business-oriented context, the residents in the India Street neighborhood, unlike the vision of the developers who consider this area to be an undeveloped area adjacent to Downtown which leads to considerable profit and a huge market, think their home and community may have a more historic-oriented developing path to step on.

2. Project History

The India Street neighborhood has a history as long as the city of Portland, and its transition reflects the development of the city as well. Life in the India Street revolved largely around waterfront activities and the residents are mostly made up by immigrants who worked on the waterfront and in the construction of the Atlantic and St. Lawrence Railroad.[3]. They developed their own land here in India Street neighborhood and created their own self-contained community with exotic culture. With the recession, India Street faced redevelopment since mid-20th century. Insensitive alterations to historic structures and the clearing of older buildings for surface parking lots and discordant new construction have diminished the character of the neighborhood. Stepping into the millennium with the recovering of Portland's economy, India Street is the target to ease housing issue in the city. Is it, however, a healthy way for this neighborhood?
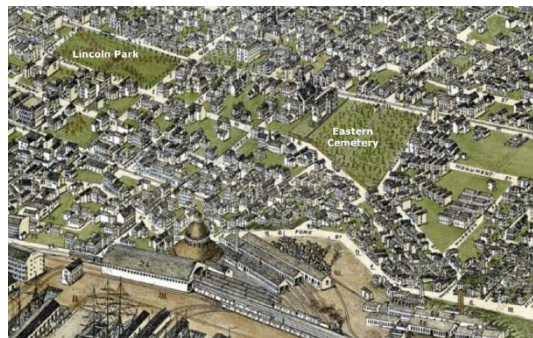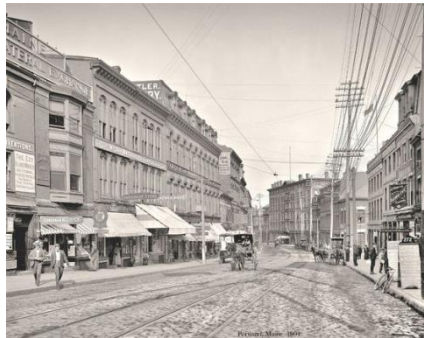
Figure. 3 India Street Neighborhood in 1871[ii][4]

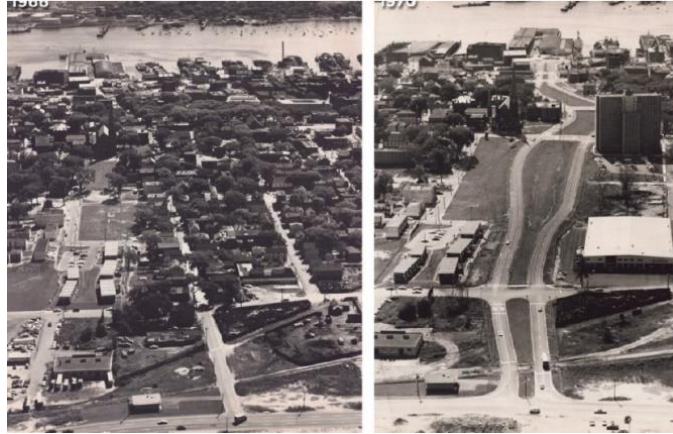*Figure. 4 Historic Photo of India Street neighborhood*

Figure. 5   Before and after of the construction of Franklin Arterial

Some of the residents and historic preservation advocators took their act around 2011. The India Street Neighborhood Association was incorporated, in early 2011 as a Maine nonprofit, to serve the diverse, mixed use neighborhood. In 2012, the Mayor, Planning Office, and City Manager committed to working with the India Street Neighborhood Association to create an India Street Neighborhood Plan. From March through September 2013, Sustain Southern Maine brought a team of planners to India Street from the initial open house to the presentation of the vision and plans that begin to describe the future shape and form of this neighborhood. An architectural survey took place to study the existing building in the neighborhood, including their form, quality, use and other influential aspects.
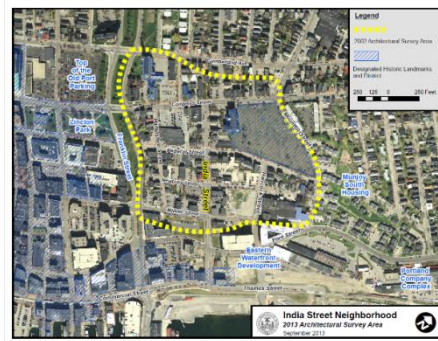
Figure. 6 Architecture Survey Study boundary diagram map in 2013

In July 2013, the India Street Neighborhood Plan was selected to receive technical assistance from a new program launched by Portland State University (the other Portland) called Urban Sustainability Accelerator. On January 15, 2015, the India Street Neighborhood Plan was recommended to City Council by the Planning Board at a public hearing. After a series of workshops, the Planning Board recommended the India Street Form-based Code and India Street Historic District to City Council on September 15, 2015.
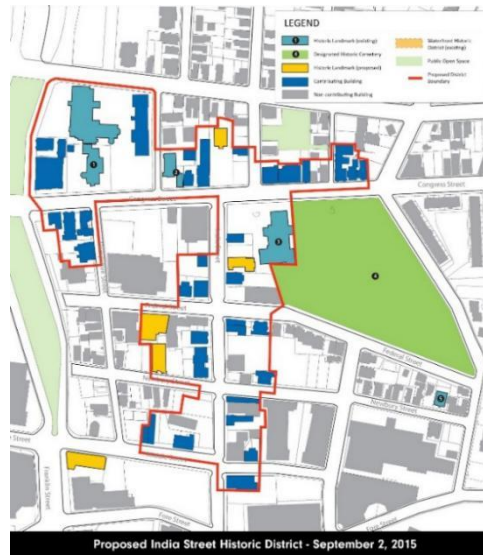

Figure. 7 Historic district boundary of India Street District

The form-based code listed quite clear about the vision of the future

constructions. Requirements of the setback and street wall façade design, construction height on different major neighborhood corridors, parking, corner site situation and additional construction situation have been focused on in the form-based code. Building height limit is a crucial element in residential project development, since it determined the number of units that can be built and earn profit [5].

Table 1 Building height limit for India Street in India Street form-based code[5].

| Subdistrict | Maximum pre-bonus Height | Height Bonuses | | | | | Maximum Height based w/bonus | Minimum Bonus floor Stepback (from the ground floor building edge facing any public right-of-way) |
		Mid-block permeability (publicly accessible)	Residential Density	GREEN ROOF	Afford. Housing		
UN	45' and 4 stories	n/a	n/a	n/a	1 story Up to 12'	57' up to 5 stories	15'
UT	65' and 6 stories	1 story Up to 12'	1 story Up to 12'	1 story Up to 12'	1 story Up to 12'	77' up to 7 stories	15'
UA (Congress Street only)	50' and 4 stories	1 story Up to 12'	1 story Up to 12'	1 story Up to 12'	1 story Up to 12'	62' up to 5 stories	15'

The condo market is booming in Portland, especially in India Street neighborhood, and seems that the historic district designation hasn't stop new constructions to be as modern as possible. Since 2015, nine residential or mixed-use buildings have gone up in the neighborhood, adding 93 units of housing. Another six residential and commercial buildings are under construction. In the past four years, 17 buildings with 201 residential units and almost 590,000 square feet of space have been built, are under construction, or are planned in a nine-block area around India Street, according to city records[6].

Figure. 8 A rendering depicts the six-story, 31-unit luxury condominium building proposed for 56 Hampshire St., along Franklin Street in Portland.

The new building boom brings a boom of private vehicles to the neighborhood and that become an issue to the neighborhood generally. The traffic is becoming worse, the street parking and off-street parking seems always not enough, and the pollution is driven people from the streets [7]. The demand of the market and the demand of redevelopment from the neighborhood itself pushes the new

constructions too fast, leaving limited space for high-quality, historic compatible design. India Street neighborhood, with a successful start of historic district preservation, generally loses its way in the high demand market and the eager of redevelopment.

3. Project Outcome

The preservation of India Street historic neighborhood has its own difficult situation, and it is partial the reason why it has gone to a dim way of conservation. The constant erosion of this area leaves the neighborhood with scattered vacant lots within the district. Instead of rebuilding or restoring some of the historic buildings, new constructions and new modern designs takes place due to a high demand of housing. The local residents, though not 100% agree with this development pattern, still let it happen because of their eager of redeveloping these vacant lots. The new thing is better than nothing. However, the new construction that is not compatible to the neighborhood context and history background may leads to more serious problems when taking a long view.

There was serval predesignated historic landmarks and more to be designated. It is not the historic resource that is inefficient, but the discontinued arrangement of them makes the historic identity of India Street not viable. The new modern constructions will even undermine the historic identity more and bring confusion for the overall context. Though during the development these year, there are still some successful project that can balance the market and the history. An adapt and reuse condo project in 2015 successfully redeveloped an existing building [8]. If more of this project could happened, India Street will have a more different look by now.
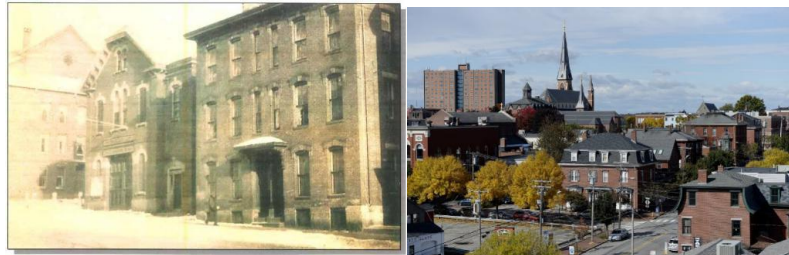

Figure. 9 Old and new neighborhood scape of India Street

The new residential projects can surly ease the housing demand around Downtown and Old Port area and provide more attraction for people who planning to move to these areas. However, the new projects also bring more private vehicles that lead to worsen traffic, parking issue, pedestrian unfriendly neighborhood and more pollution.

The need of housing and the need of redevelopment is there and cannot be just ignore. The building of the neighborhood's historic identity is necessary, too. When blaming the planning board about not giving enough effort in reviewing and requiring more high-quality design of new projects rather than approving mediocre ones, people need to review the dilemma of limited historic identity and designs with a lack of historic context. If the historic identity of the neighborhood is not strong enough for the designers to work with, then any mediocre international modern style buildings won't be a supervise. Looking at the bright side, what India Street neighborhood need is time, and given the fact that the Neighborhood Plan and the form-based code are already there, with a constant effort may India Street gain its old glory back.

4. Conclusion

In the case of India Street, the local residents, the local nonprofit and the local government, though not completely comfortable with some new designs, still said yes to many project incompatibles with the context, which leads to a boom of new constructions with limited connection with the neighborhood historic background. These constructions confused the neighborhood's historic identity and made the conservation even more difficult. This loop pushes India Street from a healthy way to successful historic conservation, and this can be a warning to many other similar cases.

The early stage of survey, study, academic engaging and public workshop are all successful in creating a full set of goals and recommendation of conservation, but when actually proceed the conservation, the balance between the market need and the preservation goals need to be focused. Reusing the old existing building is a good way for rehabilitation in a historic district and is a sustainable and historic modest way for future develop.

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