

Place and Process: A Case Study on Earthquake Mitigation in Portland, Oregon

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Case Background

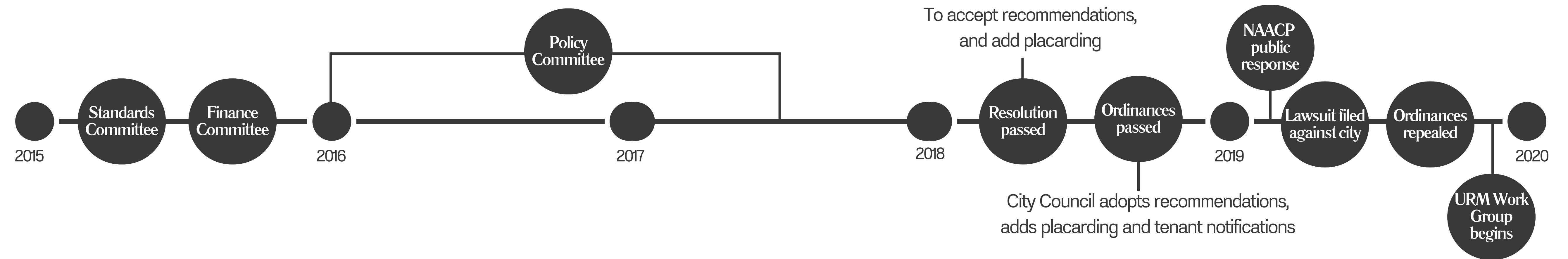
This research is an early iteration of an ongoing case study investigating the extent to which sense of place influences decision-making through examination of an earthquake mitigation policy-making process in Portland Oregon.

When: 2014 – 2020

Why: Over 1,600 unreinforced masonry buildings pose a risk of collapse in the event of an earthquake. A 9M earthquake is predicted in Portland within the next 50 years.

What: A three part committee-based process in which each committee studied discrete matters and pass findings to the next committee: (1) engineering standards, (2) financial supports to achieve those standards, and (3) policy approaches to implementation. City Council adopted recommendations with additional measures. Subsequent community actions occurred.

Who: The Portland Bureau of Emergency Management was responsible for the committee process. Committee members were appointed experts, including representatives from public schools, historic preservation, finance, engineering, affordable housing, and faith-based organizations, among others.

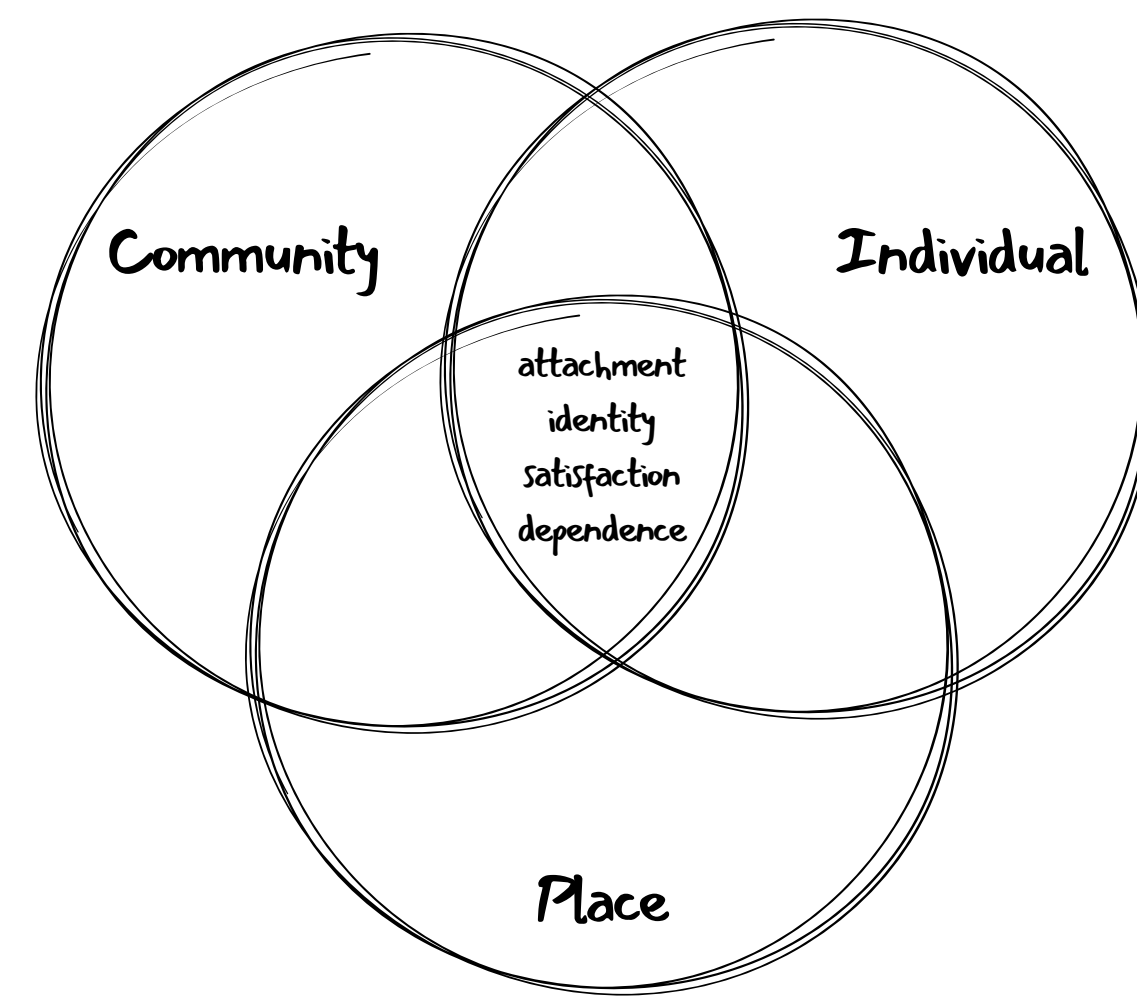


Theoretical Approach

Deliberating mitigation strategies can be a highly technical project and one that may minimize the tangible and emotional effects of implementing those strategies. As disaster mitigation and risk reduction planning shifts toward a community-based model, the need for greater understanding of the emotional and place-based interests and values of community stakeholders becomes more significant.

Understanding how community stakeholders relate to place can equip emergency managers and planners with the foresight necessary to facilitate decision-making processes that acknowledge and honor place-based relationships. This study collects evidence as to how community stakeholders and committee members express their relationships to place, and the extent to which those expressions impact processes and outcomes.

Erfani* (2022) proposes that the relationships between community, individual, and place are key for addressing — or in the best case, resolving — conflicts or disagreements in decision-making processes. In this study I apply Erfani's framework in a "looking back" practice in which I review public records and conduct reflective interviews. Sifting through qualitative data, I identify stories about place (here, URM buildings or Portland in general) within and across these spheres. Policy recommendations are then mined for evidence of those narratives, as a sign of their influence.

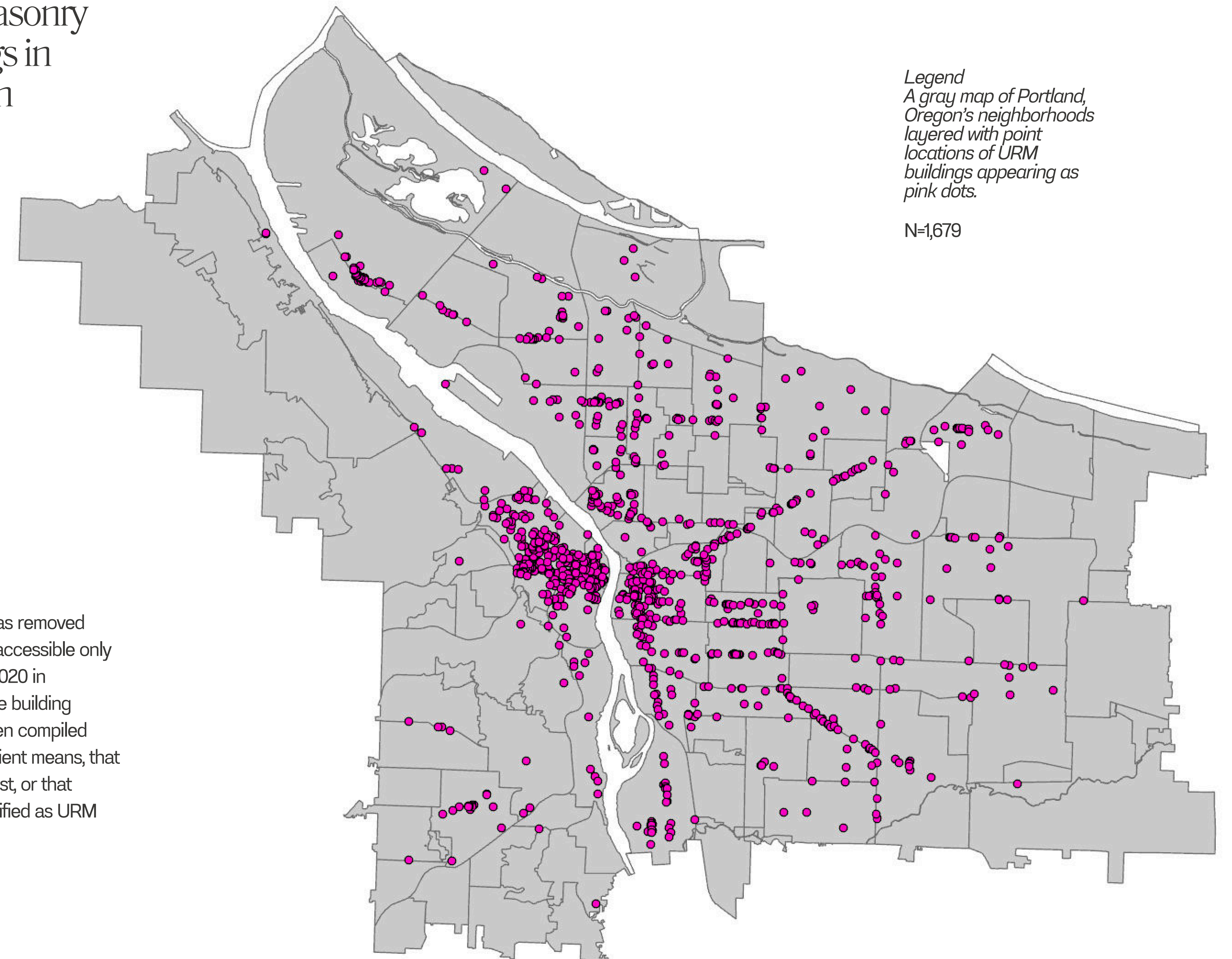


Unreinforced Masonry (URM) Buildings in Portland, Oregon

"The List"

In the mid 1990s, engineers working with the City of Portland along side students and scholars at Portland State University developed and completed a "windshield" inventory of URM buildings across the city. The output of this survey is known colloquially as "the list" and is the data from which this map is developed.

The list is highly contested. It was removed from city webpages and made accessible only through document request in 2020 in response to public outcry. Some building owners find that the list has been compiled through illegitimate and insufficient means, that buildings are missing from the list, or that buildings are inaccurately identified as URM buildings.

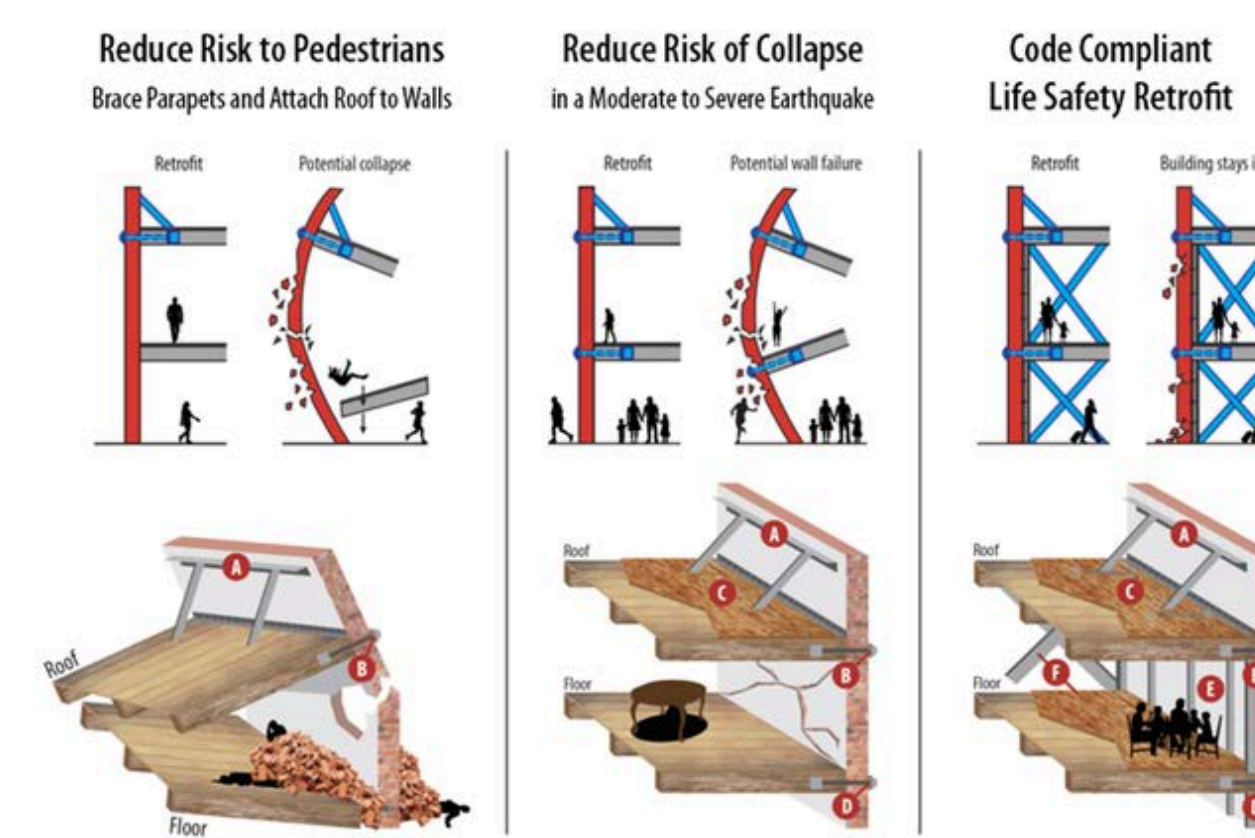


Questions

01. How do committee members and building owners express their senses of place?
02. To what extent and in what ways did these perspectives and emotional connections influence the mitigation policy process and outcomes?

Methods

Document review of 100+ written testimonies, public records, reports, and news articles
Semi-structured interviews with building owners, occupants, allies, committee members, and city staff (n=18)
• 1 hour long interviews over video call, phone call, or in person
• participants are offered \$30 honorarium
Transcription using third-party services (Zoom + Rev)
In Vivo coding and thematic analysis using Atlas.ti



Preliminary Findings

Individual (self)

Small portfolio URM building owners identify as "mom and pop shops": small businesses that can be owner-operated and that provide (naturally occurring) affordable, accessible, and uniquely charming rental and lease options.

Individual-place

As mom and pop shops, URM building owners perceive their role as preserving a piece of "what makes Portland Portland."

Individual-Community

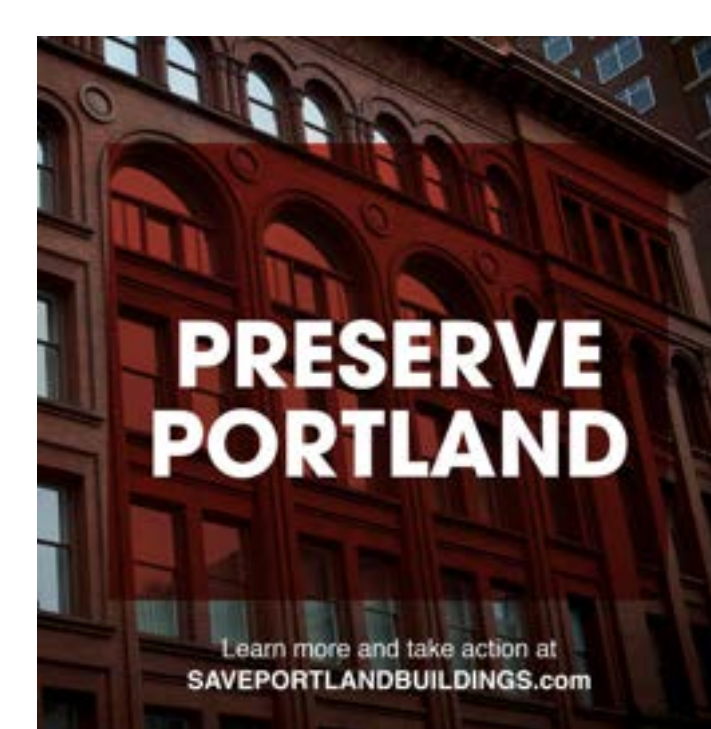
URM building owners and other community members developed a coalition called *Save Portland Buildings*. Bonding through their shared exclusion from deliberation and decision-making, this group coordinated responses to Committee and City Council processes and choices.

Community

Mom and pop shop URM building owners expressed an inability to afford retrofit mandates, as opposed to owners with larger portfolios. Without the ability to finance retrofits, these owners found that they would have to sell or demolish their buildings.

Financial challenges were a key point of concern in Policy Committee recommendations. Specialized solutions were developed for schools, historic properties, religious and non-profit uses, and affordable housing.

City Council ordinances would later mandate a notification placard that would spark additional financial issues.



Community-place

Committee members identified URM as buildings representing the history and character of Portland's main streets, as well as providing (naturally occurring) affordability. The NAACP identified an overlap in URM buildings and those listed as Cornerstones of Community for Black Portlanders.

Recommendations spoke to some of the meanings these places hold for communities, such as the social benefits that churches provide to those in need

Place

URM building owners perceive their buildings as symbolic of a Portland as they know it and want it to be: "a big city made up of small neighborhoods." The potential loss of each building represents the loss of a shared vision for Portland's present and future.

Sense of place

Building owners describe their URM as beautiful, cultural, quirky, and community-based. These are spaces where they met their future wife, carry on family legacies, and build the foundations of their careers. They describe the people who live and work in them as ranging from "long time residents" to "first-time renters."

Many of the owners of these buildings depend on them as retirement investments. Some of the owners live in their building, others spend much of their time there doing the maintenance work themselves. Beyond assets, the buildings are symbols of the owners time, energy, and attention to the street, neighborhood, and city that they grew up in and love.

Practical + Theoretical Implications

Community-related narratives were highly influential in the Policy Committee recommendations. Those additions spoke to the concerns that building owners raised about financing retrofits and the meanings these buildings hold for communities.

Individual and place-specific narratives did not appear to be influential in the recommendations. And yet, individual and place-based narratives shaped how URM policy and committee processes were perceived and experienced by small building owners. As one interviewee stated, "their building was a part of their story."

These findings point toward a space for place in disaster risk reduction. Place-identity in particular appears to have strong implications for the ways mitigation strategies are interpreted by community stakeholders. Findings also indicate that historic and contemporary political and socio-economic circumstances of a place need to frame disaster risk reduction policy development, as interventions enter into already existing built environments encoded with meaning. Further evidence is needed to strengthen these findings and explore additional implications.

Further research is needed to understand how a place-based disaster risk reduction process would function in practical terms and how such an approach might differ from community-based disaster risk reduction.

*Erfani, G. (2022). Reconceptualising Sense of Place: Towards a Conceptual Framework for Investigating Individual-Community-Place Interrelationships. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 37(3), 452-466. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08854122221081109>

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