Columbia City Neighborhood Analysis

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In our research of the Columbia City Neighborhood we attempted to create a more holistic picture of the area, its history, and its future. Our research was focused on three primary categories: analysis of Census and ACS data in creating a demographic profile, development trends within Columbia City, and current planning efforts aimed at addressing current community issues.

Columbia City’s inception was spurred by the construction of an electric rail line. The tracks connected the historic mill town to downtown Seattle along what is now Rainier Avenue, the neighborhood’s main street and the focal point of its commercial activity. This main street used to be a bustling haven for industrial activity. It began with humble mills that produced goods like leather, lumber, and fireworks. During World War II, Columbia City’s mills were expanded and repurposed to support war efforts. The industrial aesthetic created by sprawling warehouses has remained due to the business district being declared a Landmark District in 1978. Whether by chance or on purpose, the landmark status was conducive to creating the qualities of an urban environment that, today, are highly desirable. These built assets were leveraged in 2009 when a nearby light rail station exposed the area to more money, customers, and potential residents. The resulting image along Rainier Avenue is that of the ideal American main street. Few buildings rise above two floors. They are mostly of brick and tend to have large glass store fronts with open floor plans; all of which are enticing for pedestrians’ eyes. A combination of facade canopies and tree-lined sidewalks contribute to a human-scaled visual plane. The sidewalk itself is about eleven feet wide and is separated from the street by the aforementioned trees and street-side parking. Traffic is relatively slow and quiet due to thin through lanes and frequent, brick crosswalks. These human-centric designs continue to attract countless individuals to this neighborhood center.

The human demographics are evolving alongside the built environment.. Looking at Columbia City Census data from 2000 to 2010 it becomes clear growing numbers of new residents are changing the makeup of the neighborhood. In 2010 Columbia City had roughly 9,000 residents with a median age was 38 years old. The population has experienced a marked shift towards becoming a predominantly white neighborhood in the last 10 years with a 68.8% increase in white residents, a 16.3% decrease of Black or African Americans, a 70.1% decrease of Indigenous peoples, a 30.3% decrease of Asian residents, a 76.4% decrease of Pacific Islanders (Hawaii natives and other island nations), and a 3.3% increase in the Hispanic and Latino population.

Next, we examined the housing statistics for neighborhood. The 2010 Census Household Profile and Housing Units Profile revealed that Columbia City has a total of 1,885 housing units with an average household size of 2.5 persons. Of the total units, 1,743 are occupied and of the occupied units, 552 or 31.7% are owner occupied and 1,191 or 63.2% are renter occupied. There are 142 vacant units, constituting 7.5% of the total housing units, 49% of which are for rent. These numbers reflect the growing number of renters, an increased demand for rental units and a decline in single family homeownership. According to Zillow Real Estate, home values have risen 14.98% in the last year, with a 5 year average appreciation 12.92% and 10 year average 2.86%. Additionally, the currently in Columbia City the median home price is $350,827 and the median rent is $987.

Columbia City’s skyrocketing housing prices are moving parallel to an increasing housing stock. According to a July of 2016 Urban Center / Urban Village Growth Report prepared by the Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development, the urban village of Columbia City has had an increase of 247 units from 1/2016 to 6/2016, an increase of 9.2%. This number is huge compared to this yearly average of 110 units from 2006 to 2015 or 27 units from 1995 to 2005. The rapid change created by this influx in housing demands high levels of planning and community engagement in the area.

Columbia City and Hillman City have been active in pursuing community driven planning projects. The city has completed multiple large scale planning projects over the the past 30 years that focus on community planning in the area and work to address community issues. The 1998 Hillman City and Columbia City Neighborhood Plan creates a strategic growth plan and identifies specific goals for the neighborhood based on community identified many goals for the neighborhood including; maintaining the historic elements of the business district while encouraging development on the peripheries, strengthening the quality of transportation and accessibility, and making a safe, clean, and inviting neighborhood for those who spend time in Columbia City and Hillman City. Another planning project is the 2015 City of Seattle Comprehensive Plan which designates an area in Columbia City as an Urban Village and discusses how zoning will have to change to accommodate the rapid growth which the next 20 years is set to bring. Columbia City’s active citizenry often voice their opinions in the creation process for documents like 1998 Hillman City and Columbia City Neighborhood Plan and the 2015 City of Seattle Comprehensive Plan. They even submit beloved local sites for historic preservation status to maintain the character their neighborhood.

Rainier Valley Historical Society, Clara’s Books, and the Rainier Valley Radio are some of the most active participants in the Columbia City and Hillman City public sphere. They each work to address the current community fear that with rapid population growth the small town feel, culture, and connectedness of the area will be lost. Clara’s hosts events and meetings for local groups, Rainier Valley Radio actively seeks to engage and inform around local issues, and the Rainier Valley Historical Society shares information by gathering historical artifacts, photos, and stories from the region to promote the history and culture of the area. All three organizations are local, independently run and owned media sources the serve the community as outlets of information. In addition to informing the people in the region on what is going on, the organizations build community by serving as social hubs and strengthening the area’s identity.

Drawing from our research we were able to identify an outline of Columbia City and Hillman City that touches on how the history of the region has brought the area to where it is today, and how the current city and community efforts have the potential to influence it moving forward. Census and ACS data showed current socio-economic growth in the demographic of the area, which is happening in tandem with a booming housing market and in turn a community fear of loss of diversity and culture in the region, as the area grows in density. In response to the growth, there have been both city and community efforts to maintain culture and equity moving forward and insure Columbia City is a neighborhood that serves both recent and remaining residents.

**Data Appendix:**

* Seattle Census Data from 2010: <https://www.census.gov/2010census/data/>
* https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade.2000.html
* Seattle 2035 Growth and Equity Management Plan: <https://www.seattle.gov/DPD/cs/groups/pan/@pan/documents/web_informational/p2427615.pdf>
* Seattle Urban Center Urban Village Report : <https://www.seattle.gov/dpd/cs/groups/pan/@pan/documents/web_informational/p2473574.pdf>
* Columbia City and Hillman City Neighborhood Plan: https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Neighborhoods/Planning/Plan/Columbia-City-Hillman-City-plan.pdf