

Concerns about Munjoy Hill development

From Tom Bloom
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Greetings.

I am a resident of Munjoy Hill, bought my house at 95 Walnut St in the summer of 2013.

In the little over 4 years since then I have watched as a great change has come over the Hill. I am writing to express my fears of what this wave of change will easily bring.

The unique character of Munjoy Hill was what prompted me to look for three full years before finally finding my dream house when it became available. This character grew from the Hill's history of newcomers to Portland, mostly tradespeople, who built frame houses with recognizable similarity, peaked roofs, dormer windows, welcoming entrances set back from the sidewalks, small lots with simple yards; all derivative of colonial style, but still with infinite variety. From a distance the Hill had a distinct rhythm and comfortable feeling of popular neighborhood, all parts communicating with each other in a pleasant way.

In these past 4 years I have been shocked by the change in that character, as developers have rapidly exploited the remaining space, as well as the lax nature of restrictions and guidelines governing their projects. Overpriced luxury condos have squeezed into even the most improbable lots, driving up local costs, dominating visual space with garish colors, materials and scale, and rapidly destroying the very charm which attracted the development. A glaring example: From Back Cove, a look at the hill used to reveal its charm of randomly repeating variations on the original local style. Now there is a vivid horizontal gash on the western side, where the monstrosity of Munjoy Heights on West Sheridan street grins at the world with unrelieved horizontal lines, offensive orange colors, and not even a nod to landscaping, having obliterated the only native wooded space left on the hill. Prisons in Romania have more charm.

My own experience in the face of this development deserves mention: At a meeting with the city on the proposed development on Washington Ave, (the old Casale lot), I was told that my objection to the loss of my precious view of Back Cove was "romantic", a view which was largely instrumental in my buying my house. Yet the promotion for the Munjoy Heights hill prominently advertised "The View". For whom is the aesthetic quality of a space "Romantic" and for whom "Profitable"?

The supremely ugly high-rises which stain the eastern Promenade and upper Walnut Street are older vivid examples of what unrestricted development has destroyed in the past.

I am writing to implore all authorities who have a vote in this expansion please to preserve what's left of the timeless historic character of the hill. To this end I encourage the establishing of Historic Preservation District status for Munjoy Hill. This would retard the exploiting of remaining space, restrict the tearing down of properties for pure profit, and dull the flagrant speculation which is massively driving up property values (NOT always a good thing!) and reducing the supply of affordable housing. It would create a forum for all residents to have a say in how our neighborhood progresses.

Right now Profit is the principal driving force in the Hill's development, and will stay that way unless responsible citizens take a stand together to preserve what is truly valuable in our neighborhood. The Historic Preservation District for Munjoy Hill is an important step in the right direction.

Thank you for your consideration.

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