

2022

Letter of Intent:
Norman B. Leventhal
City Prize

Project title:
**Ozymandias: Using
Artificial Intelligence
to Map Urban
Power Structures
and Produce Fairer
Results for All**



Narrative description:

No system of government is perfect. None can hope to achieve absolute transparency, frictionless engagement, or unerring representation of its constituents.

Though opinions always differ, we all have seen times when good ideas don't make it through a city's political and budgetary processes, even when supported by data and comprehensive plans. We've also seen the converse, where ideas that are outdated or contrary to all stated goals happen despite protest. Democracy is limited by the high cost of meaningful, regular and well-informed civic participation, and most private citizens can claim little or effectively no power and influence within municipal government.

Change in cities can take years to accomplish. Opportunities can get lost in the tangle of public meetings spread across years, and there may be a new set of players in place once the topic comes to the fore again. As a result, opportunities to make change are missed, and stated goals go unmet.

In **Ozymandias**, we seek to encourage broader civic participation and positive change by shedding light on the innermost workings of municipal government in a novel and compelling way. We will use emergent AI computation tools to illuminate patterns in power structures and decision making to slice through the gordian knot of mass public records. In particular, we hope to highlight correctable yet previously unrecognized inequities, which in some cases may surprise all parties involved, and discover tools to implement changes that affect urbanism, design, and equity. We've named our project **Ozymandias**, after a poem speaking of the mystery and transience of power, where a massive statue toppled and buried over centuries in the desert still bears the words "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and Despair!" What remains after the current powers have shifted?



Our project will review available data sets on municipal decision making, focused on land use. We will start with records for Planning Board and City Council decisions, and consider data on race, criminal records, SeeClickFix, vehicle crashes, grant funding, TIFs, tax revenue, snow clearing, moratoriums, referendums, short-term and long-term rental licenses, RFP advertising and selection. We are especially interested in decisions that have equity impacts: development of housing, distribution of public facilities such as parks, sidewalks, trees, public bathrooms, small business approvals, and social services. Conversely, we would like to understand what decisions tend to benefit the wealthiest members of society, and who pays for which public investments.

We will seek patterns.

Some of our questions are:

- Is there a person or persons, or specific positions within the City or other organizations, that act as key gatekeepers? Or a step in an administrative process where a proposal's fate is decided?
- How many people came to each zoom meeting and submitted comments through various city portals for feedback on plans and decisions?
- How many properties are owned by occupants?
- How does the number of proposed units correlate with site plan approvals or rejections involving housing?
- Which entities are associated with the most approved/denied applications?
- Whose names (and in what roles) most appears after the phrase "sponsored by" in council minutes?
- Margin of passage/failure of measures, overall and correlated to councilors.

We will engage with local organizations committed to improving the affordability, accessibility and fairness of public decisions from the beginning, and hope that the patterns we discover will help influence public processes and foster new pathways for equity based innovative solutions to be realized.



Why Portland?

A transient city in several notable respects, Portland, Maine's city government is in the midst of an unusually chaotic transition. In the fall of 2020, wide-spread discord and dissatisfaction led to the passage of several fiercely contested municipal referenda, including rent control, minimum wage increases, and a measure to form a charter commission, which is re-evaluating fundamental structures and balances of power within city government. Meanwhile, the city has created an ambitious "One Climate Future" plan, and is undertaking other plans that could move Portland towards a more environmentally sound and just future. Which goals will be realized, and why or why not? This is a fitting time in a fitting place to reflect on distributions of political power.

Team & Engagement:

Portland Society for Architecture (PSA) will be the lead organization.

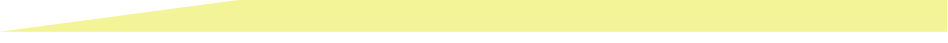
The PSA encourages innovation and vision in the built environment of Greater Portland through education, advocacy and engagement with community members, design & construction professionals, and the civically engaged or curious multi-generational public. Addy-Smith Reiman is the executive director of PSA.

PSA's existing partnerships include: BirdSafe Maine with Maine Audubon and the University of Southern Maine to address the problem of bird window strikes in Maine; One Climate Future, a joint effort of the municipalities of Portland and South Portland to focus on areas to reduce our contributions to climate change and strengthen the communities' ability to respond to climate hazards; The Forest to Cities initiative with the New England Forest Council, designed to break down barriers to mass timber construction; and the Portland Public School District for developing Outdoor Classrooms. We host a bi-monthly series, The Mechanics of the Built Environment, to convene civic leaders, city employees and professionals in design and construction to discuss topics. PSA's signature program, The Complete City, is entering its sixth year. This was a direct outcome of our USM Muskie School partnership, with The Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce and Creative Portland, in 2016, 'Growing Portland: Not Whether, but How?'

Jeff Levine would be our Principal Investigator. He was the Director of Planning & Urban Development for the City of Portland for 7 years, and is very familiar with the internal landscape of city management and staff processes.

Other team members include Liz Trice, a community activist and housing developer, and has hosted Startup Weekends, and design Charettes through her coworking space, PelotonLabs; Chris Miller, a trained architect, public artist, and maker who is on PSA's board; and Tom Nosal is a civil engineer specializing in public spaces.

The team has worked together in various combinations. Starting in 2017, Addy, Liz, and Chris Miller worked together through three PSA design competitions, which included leading a successful public redesign of a small neighborhood park, Bramhall Square and the Complete City Filled In accessory dwelling unit design competition. Team members have worked with Jeff Levine both in his former role as the Director of Planning and Urban Development in the City of Portland, and currently with his role as an advocate and consultant for data-driven and participatory design. Team members are well-networked with decision makers at the city and neighborhood level and involved in engagement organizations such as YIMBY Portland, Livable Portland, and the Portland Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee.



The team plans to recruit Tim Wallace, a geographer with Descartes Labs, to potentially visualize the patterns we may discern from the AI prompts. Tim was a guest lecturer for PSA through The Center for Global Humanities at The University of New England, and has recently moved to Yarmouth, Maine.

We plan to draw on our local community connections to create a stipended advisory team and also track civic engagement in policy making decisions as one of our metrics.

Impact: How is your proposal potentially transformative? How would you evaluate the success of this project?

If we can uncover patterns that indicate whether ideas die or move forward, we could create more efficient processes so that decisions align with data stated policy goals. We hope we could then apply this process to other cities.

Success would be evaluated by engaging local advisors, analyzing data, discovering one or more patterns in the data, and bringing that data back to the community. Future projects could include systematizing finding patterns, and attempting to use the patterns to affect an outcome.

Budget: Please include a brief narrative description of how you intend to use the prize funds. How will you leverage the prize to seek further funding?

A portion will pay PSA to do project management. These funds will be matched through our Complete City Program. We will continue to network with other organizations interested in equity and urban development, develop partnerships to streamline processes within municipalities, and seek pathways and funding to expand the research and create a model that could scale to other localities.

A portion of funding will go to create and stipend a community advisory committee and fund equity-based organizations to participate in the process. Some of the organizations envisioned include Preble Street (Homeless services), Cultivating Community (Gardening for low-income neighborhoods), The Immigrant Welcome Center, and Black Owned Maine (Black owned businesses).

And, lastly, some of the funding would go for support of MIT faculty and doctoral students, to create a data strategy, clean and analyze data sets, and align the data findings with the political and planning context in Portland.

Thank you for your consideration.



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Senior Associate, Simons Architects



PSA STAFF

ADDY SMITH-REIMAN, AICP

Executive Director