

Nohad Toulan: The University in the City

by Carl Abbott

I'm writing this commentary in my office in the Urban Center Building, overlooking the busy Urban Plaza that has become one of the focal points for Portland State University. The building and plaza exemplify three distinct stories about Nohad Toulan and his influence on the university where he worked for thirty-two years.

For PSU faculty like myself, the central story of Nohad's three decades of service is the creation of the College of Urban and Public Affairs as a key unit within the university. The new building—that it still feels new after more than a dozen years is testimony for the quality of the partnership between Nohad and architect Tom Hacker—kept the different departments and research institutes of a growing college under one roof. It also gave us very nice offices that we try not to talk about with colleagues working in older campus buildings.

As a practical accomplishment, the building and plaza demonstrate Nohad's strategic thinking, his patience in reaching his goals, and his ability to pull together pieces from here, there, and everywhere to build what he envisioned—in this case working over many years to piece together money from the city, the state, TriMet, the federal government, and private donors. This was also characteristic of his approach to the creation of the University District Plan that has guided the university since the 1990s to keep his eyes fixed on his goal while being flexible about how to get there.

In the words of former PSU President Judith Ramaley, the building and plaza are also “a physical representation of the

idea of an engaged university.” Nohad played a key role in defining our university as an urban research university and giving substance to that idea. Light rail and streetcar tracks connect the university to the city while first floor commercial space in the Urban Center caters to students and non-students alike (a week before writing this article, I taught my last class of fall quarter in a classroom one floor above a very nice pizza restaurant). And in a larger sense that goes beyond both pizza and plaza, Nohad Toulan “represented the idea of the city,” to again quote Ramaley.

The College of Urban and Public Affairs

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Nohad Toulan put together the College of Urban and Public Affairs like a jigsaw puzzle. Like puzzle-solvers, he had a good idea of what the final result should look like, but he had to find the right pieces to fit together in the right pattern. He usually had a great eye for spotting the matching colors and shapes, although, like all jigsaw puzzle work, there was an occasional piece that seemed right at first but ultimately didn't quite fit.

Nohad Toulan arrived at Portland State from a faculty position at Columbia University in 1972 with the challenge of bringing greater coherence to a disparate collection of urban studies activities. An undergraduate Urban Studies Certificate dated from 1959, making it the oldest such program in the country and the same age as MIT's urban studies doctorate. It operated with a single core course sequence and one dedicated faculty member under the umbrella of the Center for Urban Studies—a research and service institute within the College of Social Science that had offended the Portland establishment by revealing the unhappy reality of embedded racism in the city's treatment of the Albina neighborhood. There was also a nascent Ph.D. in Urban Studies. It was one of three interdisciplinary

doctorates that the state allowed PSU to establish in 1969 (the others were Systems Science and Environmental Sciences and Resources, and all were designed not to encroach in the turf of the academic big boys in Eugene and Corvallis). It operated by a committee of faculty from geography, economics, sociology, and political science and reported through the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Within four years, Nohad was Dean of a new School of Urban Affairs. It included Black Studies (which had previously been essentially homeless within the university); Administration of Justice (from Social Science); a new Institute on Aging; the Center for Population Research and Census; and the three urban studies programs. For the first time, some of the graduate urban studies faculty had their primary appointments in Urban Studies, which could operate like an academic department rather than a committee. The different research institutes and programs were now housed together in Francis Manor, a red brick apartment building from the 1920s converted for academic use. Lucky faculty got offices in the old living rooms, which were more spacious, of course, than those in the converted bedrooms and kitchens— which would again be true of East Hall where the School was located from 1987 to 2000.

The next dozen years brought curricular development—a new Master of Urban Planning, a Graduate Certificate in Gerontology, a Master's degree for Administration of Justice, and separate tracks in the Urban Studies Ph.D. One of these tracks would evolve into the separate Public Administration and Policy Ph.D. in 1989. There was also an important addition and name change. When the graduate Public Administration program moved from the Political Science Department, the School of Urban Affairs became the School of Urban and Public Affairs.

The final organizational expansion came in the 1990s. Budget cuts in the early 1990s eliminated the university's School of Health and Human Performance and set its faculty adrift,.

Nohad offered many of them a safe harbor, laying the foundation for the present School of Community Health. Jack Schendel, who had been the dean of Health and Human Performance, recalls that those faculty were impressed by Nohad's openness and responsiveness. He comments that "they were at ease and believed that they would be respected and supported in the School of UPA. Their conclusions were a direct result of Nohad's skill, sympathy, and understanding of their circumstances."

Then in 1997 the School of Urban and Public Affairs became the College of Urban and Public Affairs, an upgraded title and status in academic lingo. The School of Government added Public Administration faculty from Lewis and Clark College, which was shedding its small graduate programs, and PSU's Department of Political Science moved over from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The next year, Senator Mark Hatfield allowed his name to be given to what is now the Hatfield School of Government, fulfilling one of Nohad's long-standing goals. After all, if Harvard had a Kennedy School of Government, and the University of Minnesota had a Humphrey School of Public Affairs, why should Portland State be left out of the mix?

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Was Nohad always successful? Did he always see the future clearly? Certainly not. It is unlikely that Community Health was on his radar in 1972, but he recognized the possible synergies when a group of faculty was available. Architecture and urban design were his first loves as a scholar, but he never found the right arguments to convince architecture faculty to align with an urban studies and policy school.

While navigating the educational bureaucracy, Nohad was

intensely loyal and supportive of his faculty and colleagues. Melody Rose, a former Hatfield School faculty and now Interim Chancellor of the Oregon University System, has called him a “champion of his faculty” who held them to high standards and rewarded their accomplishments. Many of his seemingly routine bureaucratic actions, such as consolidating small programs into larger ones, were designed to preserve faculty jobs (including my own) during times of budget slicing. For one specific example, he was willing to support his new health faculty by incorporating an exercise laboratory into the Urban Center despite his zero expertise in the field. His loyalty extended outside his own school, leading the effort to rename what was originally Harrison Hall on the PSU campus for George Hoffman, who had been Dean of Social Sciences when Nohad first arrived and who shared something of his vision of what Portland State could become.

The University District

The Urban Center block is a pivot point in the development of the larger University District. It is a physical link between the older campus around the Park Blocks and the expanding university presence along Southwest Fifth and Fourth avenues, paving the way for the Engineering Building, the Academic and Student Recreation Center, and other buildings to come.

In the mid-1980s, the City of Portland undertook a Central City Plan that revisited fifteen years of successful downtown development and expanded the narrow downtown focus to a more extensive set of core districts.

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Commentators give Nohad the credit for the inclusion of a single item among the dozens of action items: “Create a

University District which fosters Portland State University's growth." The 1988 ordinance adopting the Central City Plan included Paragraph 124: "The Plan supports the growth of Portland State University by calling for the development of a master plan for the University District, and committing the city to work with PSU to assure that such a master plan will meet the full range of the University's needs."

When Lindsay Desrochers arrived as Vice-President for Finance and Administration in 1991, Nohad helped her turn those brief sentences into concrete plans to meet the needs of a burgeoning student body. He chaired the campus planning committee and worked with the city to have the University District plan adopted as a component of the city's comprehensive plan—an action that opened up freedom for the university to grow and develop. The plan aimed at multiple outcomes, including improved transportation for the campus, more classrooms, and more student housing, but also market rate housing and retailing to make the district a vital part of the larger city. These are things that Nohad had been thinking about since he had arrived in Portland, and which he would continue to work on even after his retirement in 2004. It was, Desrochers says, "stewardship over a long period of time" In more detail, she adds:

I wanted to really start undertaking an overall planning process for the physical development of the university. No small job when you consider we're right in the middle of the city. But there were many things happening, like the light rail had just been launched. There was discussion about the street car. There were a lot of reasons why we needed to be thinking about how we would fit in to this metro landscape. The thing was that I needed some allies. You don't get something like that done alone. It's about a network of people. Nohad really became my chief ally in getting this agenda moved. In a way, he became kind of like the godfather for me. In a good sense. Whenever I'd get stuck at a certain point about how to proceed, whether it was with the city or someone on the campus. Nohad was my point of departure.

The Engaged Urban Research University

Nohad was always aware of the junior position of Portland State within Oregon's university system, and looked for ways to build on its unique advantages—its location in Portland, its diverse population of nontraditional students, and its ability to attract faculty interest in building community connections. He drew on his own passion for urban life—not just the streets and buildings, but the people who use those buildings and walk those sidewalks. As a result, he helped to make PSU a pioneer in community-based education.

This commitment dated to his first years at Portland State. In 1974, PSU President Joe Blumel held a retreat about community engagement. One result was the Vital Partners compact among the City of Portland, Multnomah County, and Portland State involving jointly agreed research and support for graduate students. An important player in the process was Don Clark, chair of the Multnomah County Commission in the mid-1970s and previously a faculty member in Administration of Justice. The specific Vital Partners initiative died in the severe Oregon recession of the early 1980s, but one of its research reports resulted in the decision for the county to stop providing municipal services and for Gresham and Portland to annex what had previously been unincorporated suburban neighborhoods and thus shape the political landscape of the twenty-first century.

Fast forward to 1990 and another crisis for Portland State, timed for the arrival of Judith Ramaley as the university's new president. The Governor's Commission on Higher Education had just floated a proposal to dismantle PSU, giving the parts that generated outside funding like Engineering and Business Administration to Oregon State University, the University of Oregon, and Oregon Health and Science University and leaving the remnants for a truncated and surely impoverished PSU. Nohad was one of a handful of people who helped Ramaley think through a strategy to keep the university intact and actually

grow it. He pointed her to provisions in the federal Higher Education Act that sketched the outlines for a new sort of institution to be known as an urban research university, on a rough analogy with the land grant universities that had such fruitful relations with the nation's agricultural and resource economy.

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It was a plausible and appropriate vision for a scrappy urban university—we might call it the mammal versus dinosaur strategy.

Nohad had already been thinking along these lines, and he contributed important ideas to a five point Portland Agenda for the university. Portland State was able to fend off dismemberment by offering a compelling alternative as an urban university whose research and teaching would serve the metropolitan community. Agenda items included the Portland Education Network, PORTALS (a regional library cooperative that was an important step toward an interconnected scholarly information system), and the Institute for Portland Metropolitan Studies. IMS was "a hand in trust to the community" in the words of Ethan Seltzer, its first director. It was a neutral university forum for researching and debating important regional issues, and it was and is governed by an external board on which a Portland State representative has a vote.

With Ramaley, Toulan, and others running with new ideas, Portland State became a nationally admitted example of the engaged university. Even before the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching had articulated the parameters for the engaged university, Nohad was already helping Portland State walk the talk. The model includes shared risk and responsibility, an openness to institutional learning, and a commitment to two-way engagement rather than a oneway transfer

of expertise from university to community. As Nohad understood, an engaged university is not a consultant to the community but a partner with it.

The Toulan Style

Nohad was a planner, a city planner by profession and long-range thinker by temperament. He fit right into the Oregon political ethos, which valued a rational "public interest" approach to issues ranging from land use to health policy. He was adept at defining a long-range goal, rationally analyzing barriers and opportunities, and developing a flexible strategy to capitalize on those opportunities.

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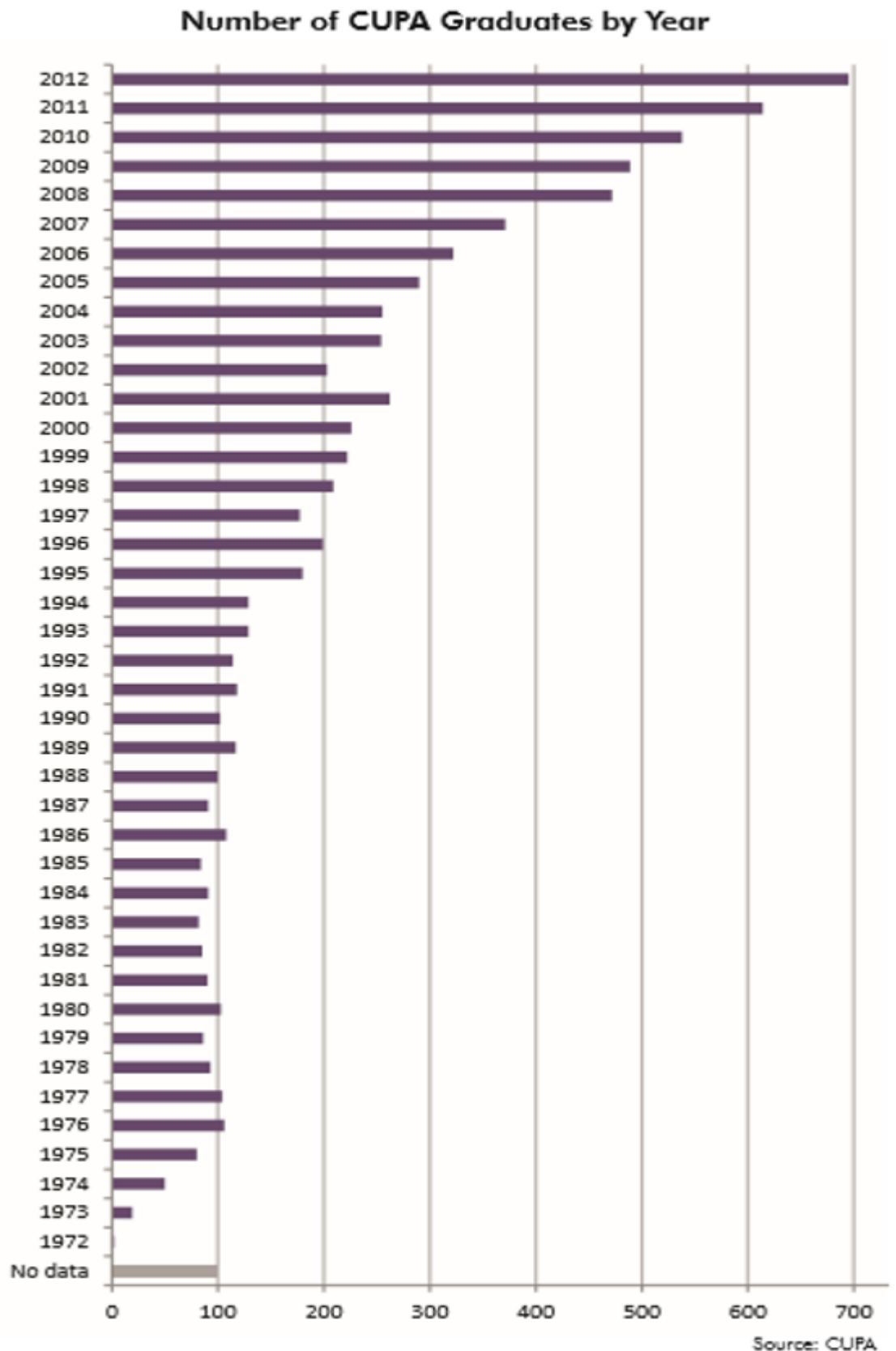
He was meticulous in day to day work. Associates were in awe of the massive spreadsheet that he developed to track expenses and revenue sources and test budget scenarios. As his longtime assistant dean Victoria Gilbert put it, the 68,000 cells amounted to "acres of data" that would have been impossible to print out. He used his data to prepare for the worst and line up talking points in defense of his units. Faculty groaned when he came to update us on budget issues armed with two or three dozen overheads detailing enrollment and revenue, but we also knew that those same charts and graphs were powerful ammunition in contests with other deans for the allocation of university resources.

Nohad worked incredibly hard. In the early years of the 1970s and 1980s, he was everywhere in the urban studies and planning graduate programs. He tracked the progress of every Ph.D. student on hand-written tables. He chaired comprehensive exam and dissertation committees and came to every oral graduate examination and dissertation defense. He advised students, especially international students from Africa and the Middle East and older adults who faced the challenge of juggling

families, jobs, and studies.

In the same years, he made sure that Portland State was an active participant in national networks for urban studies and planning education through the Urban Affairs Association and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. Whenever outside experts questioned the combination of urban studies and urban planning as a single academic unit, he would point to exactly the same structure at MIT, and he was extremely pleased when research by PSU professor Jim Strathman used objective criteria to find that PSU had the fifth-ranked urban studies program in the country. As the relatively small School of Urban Affairs grew into CUPA, he was less directly engaged in promoting individual programs, but was equally pleased when the Hatfield School and School of Community Health earned

accolades.



At the same time he kept his eye on 68,000 spreadsheet cells, he always thought ahead. He could wait patiently for senior professors to retire so that he could reallocate the salary to

hire two up-and-coming new faculty. People who knew him and worked with him at Portland State all say the same thing in slightly different ways. As Ethan Seltzer puts it, good things take time, and Nohad had the patience of someone who had committed his career to a single university. To Sumner Sharpe, who was on the faculty when Nohad arrived, he was a “determined implementer and developer” who was “always looking for opportunities” to realize his vision. Former Provost Michael Reardon has commented that he knew that PSU has had to “develop on the margins” and follow opportunities as they arise. To Judith Ramaley, he was a long-term thinker who was faithful to his vision while always being willing to make tactical adjustments. As Lindsay Desrochers might say, Nohad exhibited what Aristotle called phronesis or practical wisdom:

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He was so successful because he was a wise man, and a wise man knows what to say and when to keep quiet, cultivates a strategic approach to dealing with people . . . Brilliance is a great quality, but it's nothing without wisdom [and] the ability to interact with other people. He was also successful because he had a fundamental, perhaps spiritually based, belief in the individual dignity of each person.

I want to end on a personal note. As everyone who met him remembers very well, Dr. Nohad Toulan was formal person, always properly dressed and somewhat (very!) intimidating when you met him for the first time. I was definitely on my best behavior when I was picked to team-teach the introductory graduate course with him my first quarter in urban studies (it worked out fine when we compared notes after reading the first set of student papers and he decided that I was a tough grader). Yet despite his formality, none of his faculty called

him Dr. Toulan in our conversations. He was Nohad when we talked with him and Nohad when we talked about him. I have been reflecting in the past weeks about our relationship. Our age difference of fifteen years was too small for me to think of him as a father figure. Instead, I think of him as the serious older brother who was always looking out for his "families" of CUPA faculty, Portland State University, and our larger community, willing to correct when necessary but always supportive and always thinking about the future of his team, his university, and his city.

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