

## **If This Town Was a Woman Named "Saleme"**

Salem needs a vision check. In this sense: what sort of desired image does our city have of itself, and how well are we moving toward that vision?

Let's imagine a woman named Saleme.

She has a certain vibe about her. She's unique, as everyone is. How Saleme feels inside about herself, she wants to express outside in the way she dresses, acts, talks, and such.

This is the key to having a sense of style: knowing who you are, and projecting that self-image confidently. Not copying someone else.

Salem needs to do this. We aren't Portland, Corvallis, Eugene, Ashland, or any other place. Salem is a city like no other in the entire world.

Yet even though I've lived here for thirty-six years, I still have difficulty understanding who this city I know so well and love so much really is. Which is OK, because cities, like people, defy simplistic descriptions.

But Salem still needs a broad vision of what citizens want our city to be like. This should guide specific governmental decisions. Similarly, how could Saleme get dressed if she doesn't know whether she prefers a sophisticated tailored style or laid-back casual appearance?

It's pretty clear that our City leaders —elected officials and top administrators — aren't big on the Vision Thing. Their focus is on what's right in front of them, not the big picture.

So we get a mishmash of policy decisions that don't fit together well. It's as if Saleme was dressed by a bunch of random strangers with different tastes.

Shoes from a construction worker. Pantsuit from a banker. Jewelry from a belly dancer. There's no way she'd end up with a look that matched her own sense of style.

Memorable cities don't leave their image to chance. They know the importance of well-fashioned urban design.

Yet the City of Salem is prone to doing this and that without asking how “this” and “that” meld, fit together, harmonize in fulfilling a vision of what Salemians want their city to be.

A giant freeway’ish third bridge. Downtown parking meters. Tall apartments and a nursing home next to Riverfront Park. Car-free crossing to Minto-Brown Island. Removing beautiful downtown trees. Constructing a large police building on Civic Center property.

It doesn’t take an urban designer to realize these parts don’t fit together into an attractive whole.

For example, a now-defunct riverfront apartment complex was approved that would have obstructed views of the Minto-Brown pedestrian bridge’s signature arch.

Fortunately, some Salemians are trying to do something about this lack of coherence.

They remind me of my wife, who has a better sense of style than I do. I’ll be standing by the door, car keys in hand, and hear “Do you really think that shirt goes with those pants?”

Recently-organized Salem Community Vision is asking this sort of question of City officials. Check out their Facebook page. Help Salem develop an urban style that fits with our vision of ourselves.

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Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city’s Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at [hinesblog.com](http://hinesblog.com)