



Inside the Portland Dome





Polymer Sky: Inside the Portland Dome

Artwork by Stephen Korbich
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“The higher the buildings, the lower the morals.”
(Noël Coward)

Background

Built over 5 years beginning in 2109, Portland’s dome was one of the first freestanding spheres designed to sustain life. Just three kilometers (two miles) wide under the central dome (9.42 square km, 6.25 square miles), it is ringed by a 12 km (6 mile) circle of agriculture. In 2088, the City of Portland commissioned the Hastings Gun Corporation, which had enriched local coffers during the 40 Years War between India and Pakistan, to begin designing a sphere over a portion of Portland’s central core. The City Council was hesitant about prospects for Portland, as separate factions fought about how to approach the problem. Before the Council had a chance to organize, Hastings had purchased most of the area that became the central sphere. The few remaining properties made their owners fabulously wealthy as Hastings consolidated the city. Those latter names are well-known in Portland now: Pamplin, Ho, Naito, Rinella, Chao.

During the inevitable civil collapse, Hastings, with its vast stockpiles of weaponry, was in a position to defend the dome. The company established a plutocracy of corporate leaders and ruling families and established martial law. The most controversial moment in the history of new Portland was when Hastings decided to permanently seal the city off in 2115—an event known as “the Enclosure.” They held a lottery for residents to live in the “undercity” as workers. For the 50,000 who won lotteries, this was a bittersweet victory: they survived, but only to exist in effective slavery in the bowels of the city.

The first dome over the city rose like an enormous snow-globe over the taller buildings of downtown. As the outer environment

began to fail, the city fathers realized they needed a sustainable source of agriculture. By this time, most of the population had either died or begun living in dugout caves in the city's west hills, so a work crew set out to raze the ground immediately outside the dome and put it under a low, flat "skirt" that could be used as a vast greenhouse. Over the decades, as the population grew, the city rose upward. The agricultural skirt continued to extend outward to grow enough food for the rising city; over time, engineers reinforced its supports to help stabilize the soaring central dome, which now rises 4 kilometers—a giant megalopolis four times the height of the world's tallest 21st century building, taller even than bald Mount Hood, the wasted crag poking up to the west of the city.

Description

Deep under Portland, machines groan and thump. The **Undercity** is so tightly packed with them that the people who maintain the great metallic beasts have become cogs themselves. The machines can be repaired and recalibrated—they are permanent. Here it's human life that is transitory; a brief period before the body gives out, is recycled, and quickly replaced. The rhythms of the Undercity are precise: the whoosh of fluids, the precision click of gears, the crackle of electricity. Machine sounds, a machine existence.

Above the Undercity, but nowhere near the light, are the lower realms of hell. **Level One** contains the chaos of **Buckman**, a Darwinian dystopia where the strong hunt and the weak cower in dark, flickering shadows. In **Albina**, Thoreau's dictum is the motto, as quietly desperate lives afflict the mass of men. They are packed in there like chickens in cages—drab, ugly cages of grimy cement. **Central City**, once Portland's glamorous heart, is where the proles go for vacation. The grand boulevards are still wide and spacious; the old buildings have some louche charm. And the gardens and trees once planted as a rebuke to the dying planet now themselves fighting death in filtered, gray light. But still, it is as lovely a place

as most of the workers will see in their sorry lives. Above Central City is **Irvington**, now nearly two kilometers in the sky. Once the toniest neighborhood, the home of industrialists and biosphere kings, Irvington still has the bones of wealth and even a few people whom those in Level One call rich. But their dwellings—five, ten, twenty times the size of an Albina flat—depress the hearts of those truly wealthy who overnight here when forced to visit the old part of the city.

And those rare people, the truly wealthy, where do they live? Higher, always higher. **Level Two** was the first playground of the rich, a beta test on spectacular overindulgence. In that revival time known as the *nouvelle naturaliste*, the ultra-wealthy sent workers out to the ruins of the old city to harvest raw materials and then built a garden fit for gods on top of their old dome. A kilometer in height, Level Two was their effort to recreate their coastal summer homes, their alpine cottages, sylvan glades and waterfalls, their golf courses and polo grounds. They were too successful: their idyll was too glorious to sully with occupation—they needed yet another place to live. Came **Level Three**, with Italian villas and Scottish castles, guarded by legions of footmen. And yet, even as the barbarians down in Level One toiled twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day, the wealthy were not satisfied. They needed even more magnificent dwellings, places among the clouds. With sacks of money unimaginable to those below, they began building up the final, most glorious city, a place to bask in the last angelic shafts of sunlight that flash briefly through roiling clouds, lighting up the devastation of a dying planet below.

The People

In the fifteen generations since the City of Portland first buttoned itself up against the world, the once-diverse population has become the ultimate melting pot. Names still suggest ancestral lineage—McLaughlin, Chao, Sanchez, Patel—but the genomes have become so thoroughly blended that the concept of “race” has for the most

part evaporated. This is even true among the aristocracy; although they only inter-marry among their own class, they came from diverse backgrounds themselves.

Life in Portland is short and unpleasant. Outside the small ruling class, infant mortality is high, and the lack of healthcare insures that most will die prematurely from an easily-addressed accident or disease. The average lifespan continues to fall and currently sits at about 40 years old. The ruling class has seen no benefit in ameliorating these ills – after all, workers begin to decline in their forties, anyway. The current system provides for a constant influx of strong young bodies into the workforce.

It is true that most of the population spends their days toiling in menial jobs (factory, maintenance, and service industries employ the bulk of the people), but the city harbors a wider variety of personalities than may be evident at first glance. The city contains a complex waltz of different players – those who rule and those who are ruled, sure, but also those who hide from scrutiny, those who carve out their own spheres of power, those who live underground. Together, they make up the population of the teeming city.

- **Aristocracy.** About 5% of the city is made up of the ruling aristocracy. They live in fantastic wealth in the upper three levels.
- **Service Workers.** Another 2% of the population serves the aristocracy, working as butlers, au pairs, cooks, masseuses and so on. This select group actually gets to live in the upper levels, but they have little freedom to pursue any of their own interests.
- **Workers.** Call them proles or drones, but they're the bulk of Portland's humanity, dutifully clocking in at 8 a.m. and clocking out at six.
- **Criminal underworld.** Not everyone is happy punching clocks. For a sizable percentage of the population – estimates range from 3-8% – the life of crime makes a more satisfying lifestyle. These folks have to stay off the digital grid in order

to ply their trades (industrial espionage, drugs, theft, trading in contraband).

- **Invisibles.** There are others who live off the digital grid who do so for more philosophical reasons. Call them the “invisibles” –people who don’t register on the city databases, who have scrubbed or changed their biological signatures. They may have to dabble in strictly illegal activities, but they stay hidden, barter, and try to live in the dark corners of the city.
- **Political dissidents.** A small but growing group are flatly opposed to the social order. They despise the aristocracy and the dull masses who enable it. They live underground, too, attempting to subvert systems, create chaos, and make people see that radical change is the only alternative.
- **The devout.** Finally, a small segment of the population is devoted to religious movements. These, too, have enjoyed growing popularity as people are drawn to ways of life that offer more hope than a short, grim life.

Social Turmoil

The Portland biodome was built during a time of great stress for the people of Portland, when private enterprise essentially displaced civic leadership in the city. The founding families of Pamplin, Ho, Naito, Rinella, Chao, and Hastings established monopolies of enterprise and the ruled as a plutocracy. Those invited to dwell in the biodome after Enclosure were serfs or worse, so from the very start the city had a deeply divided sense of class. Over the three centuries since the city’s founding, the fruit of that poison has continued to grow, so that the city is now sharply divided between the resentful, teeming masses of Level One and the increasingly remote aristocracy in the higher levels.

The result is a city divided against itself. As the decades have gone on, the ruling families have become ever more insular and paranoid, while the mood on the street has darkened. There are

constant revolutionary movements, increasingly put down by corps of robots. (The rules have found that human help—domestic and military—tend to be less loyal than their polymer replacements.) As Level One has slipped ever closer to anarchy, the upper-level ruling class is happy to let gang lords maintain the “peace”—so long as the utilities and banks remain functional. The wisest among them realize that it’s becoming harder and harder to maintain that balance.

Corporations

From the moment a Portlander wakes up and makes tea to the moment she turns off the light at night, nearly every moment is regulated by the forces of the corporations. People depend on corporations for everything—not just the products they buy, but their jobs, their homes, even the water they drink and the electricity that crackles through the walls. We may divide our world into spheres, like the public or civic, family, private, and work, but these divisions have merged to a large extent in 25th century Portland. The reason is corporations.

In a world where information about the moment-by-moment habits of people is so easy to track, corporations function as an unblinking eye watching their customers/employees—roles from which the population find it hard to escape. When a person turns on a faucet, someone is monitoring it. When they get in a registered vehicle; when they walk into a building. When they clock in at work, go to lunch, kiss their children at night—someone is always monitoring, always watching.

At least, that’s the expectation.

In reality, the corporations take in far too much data to process. They monitor selectively. Furthermore, in-fighting among the aristocracy has led to rival corporations and market competition—a recent development abhorrent to the ruling class. (Some of the rival businesses are even owned by proles.) Much of their energy now goes to industrial espionage and defense.

Nevertheless, society is organized through the matrix of corporate control. There is no public sphere, almost no physical space not controlled or monitored by corporation, no activity that happens without the orchestration of a corporate actor. (The lone exception are churches, which enjoy a small amount of control over their own facilities.) People's lives are ordered by their associations with these corporations. The principal connection is with one's employer, but people have corporate landlords, corporate utility-providers, and so on—all relationships they must nurture or fear becoming critically disenfranchised. Of course, there are a few people who chose to go underground, to carve out existences off the grid—but these are rare citizens, and all labeled criminals who are a threat to the social (corporate) order.

Crime and the Black Market

In a city where there is no civic authority, no external source of control beyond those with power, laws are a murky subject. The ruling Five Families originally wrote a city charter that contained a small section on criminal law—but lacking a governing body, it never became functional legal code. Instead, the Five Families operate much more like the mafia, where rules are agreed on to keep peace and assure profit—and are often temporary or provisional. They last as long as no one is breaking them, and the families make sure to leave a great deal in a legal gray area. That gray area becomes the stuff of covert activity, both financial and military, in which all ruling families happily participate.

There are really only a few iron-clad “laws.” The Five Families agree to let the city council oversee the Central Bank and work together to protect it from disruption. They work together to maintain external city defenses and all agree that no lasers or combustion-guns can be legally used inside the dome. They allow Portland to run in a fairly anarchic, libertarian mode, but if harmful illegal drugs enter the market or dangerous elements upset the security balance, they step in. (Publicly, at least. Privately, they may

be the ones peddling the drugs.) They make sure food production is absolutely protected—the Agricultural Sector remains the highest-security zone in the city, even more secure than the upper levels. Finally, services like water and sewers, controlled by Hastings, are the one area of private industry the other families agree not to disrupt or sabotage (though they have all tried to acquire them over the decades).

These areas account for a very small percentage of the activities and economy within the City of Portland. What remains is an active area of competition among the families, and they are all in a permanent state of low-level conflict with each other. Like independent nations, they have their own standing armies, their own surveillance and spies, and they are constantly engaged in acts of espionage, theft, and destruction. There have even been periodic wars between the families, though these had such destructive consequences they've managed to avoid them for the last 48 years.

Adventures in the City

The City of Portland Game Setting was designed as a template for GMs and players to use to create their own, unique adventures. The Setting contains an overview of the physical, technological, religious, cultural, and political geography of Portland; general descriptions of the lowest of the four residential boroughs in Portland; and detailed information on the borough of Buckman. While it describes some of the higher profile people, places, and alliances, it is nowhere near exhaustive. These descriptions provide a basic skeleton of the city for you to flesh out in your own adventures. Use this information as a guide to create your own versions of the city.