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Architectural Criticism

Why Do We Hate the Unfamiliar?

By George "Bing" Sheldon

I am pleased to accept Allan Classen's invitation to participate in a dialogue about architecture in Portland. I believe Jane Jacobs' book *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* described the benefits of and advocated for grassroots planning with meaningful participation of citizens, something we in Portland have enjoyed for decades. This forum will hopefully expand on Jacobs' ideas and focus on issues that will be benefited by informed opinion and open discussion.

Let's start with the question of architects' taste. It is quite true that architects admire work that is creatively innovative, which other people often find unfamiliar and inappropriate. This state of affairs reflects the need for a higher level of understanding of the challenges the architect and the development team must address in the process of design; it is not only about taste.

So what is this all about?

Generally, people like older buildings for many reasons. They are usually constructed with traditional building materials and reflect traditional construction means and methods as well as familiar historical styles within the community in which they have been erected. Being familiar, they are accepted without much discussion until removed or replaced with new construction.

So why don't architects design buildings like this today?

The answer is that we design within today's environment. We are responsible for providing to our clients and the community the best buildings we can design that respond to today's needs and standards. We architects do not determine the need for the building project; our client does. Nor do we determine standards. The public does this through zoning and building codes, energy and design standards, etc. We attempt to produce a design that responds positively to all of these often conflicting needs and standards at a construction cost that is feasible for our client.

To do this, we must be open to and supportive of new building materials and construction technology, which in turn results in new design challenges and opportunities.

So what is different today?

Up until World War II, labor was relatively cheap and materials were more expensive. As a result, architects responded by utilizing local materials such as brick and wood and incorporated time-intensive, intricate design details to reflect the latest fashions in vogue at the time. After the war, the U.S. emerged with an industrialized economy with relatively high labor costs and a host of new building materials, such as aluminum, needing new applications. This was a particular concern in Oregon with its aluminum production capacities interdependent upon Bonneville power administration's hydroelectric power supply.

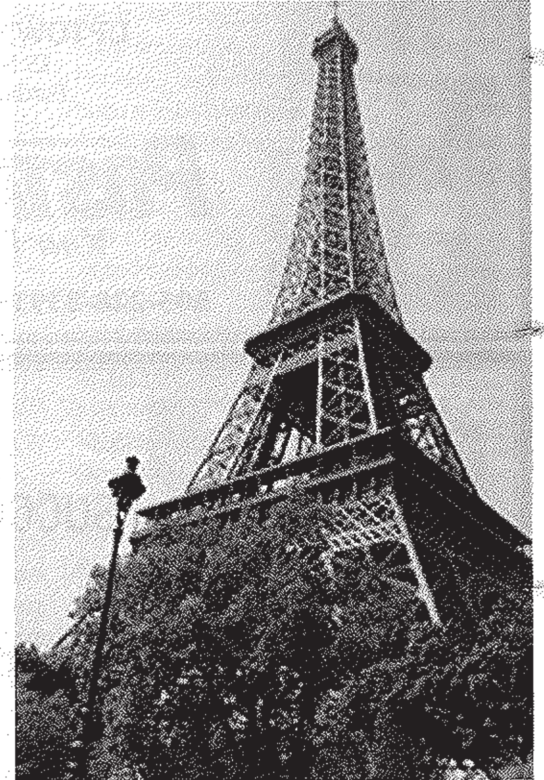
The best local example of one such response is Pietro Belluschi's 1946 Equitable Building (now called the Commonwealth Building), which introduced new uses for aluminum. He wrote of his design aims: "The design of this new office building for Portland is fundamentally an expression of faith that from our modern techniques, materials and understanding of present-day architectural problems, we are able to create a new kind of beauty—a beauty which is not borrowed from the past but is our own—clean, strong and straightforward." At the time of its construction, it set a new standard that was recognized as one of the most technically and aesthetically exciting buildings of the time. Today, it is recognized as a classic—an aesthetic masterpiece—and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

We architects are painfully aware that the public would prefer to keep the built environment unchanged—or at least familiar. We are, however, by the nature of our professional mission, agents of change. We approach that mission creatively, seeking design solutions that respond to both the logical needs of constructability and the emotional goal to inspire. While our designs may be unfamiliar—even unwanted by the public at the time of construction—often, with the lapse of time, designs that were hated by the public have become accepted and eventually loved.

For example, Gustave Eiffel's tower was built to demonstrate the capabilities of a new structural material and with the condition that it would be erected for the 1889 Universal Exposition (World's Fair) and then torn down.

Our mutual goal is to make our community a better place through good architecture, urban design and planning. I believe we in Oregon and Portland have made substantial progress in the last decades toward this goal. For us to realize the full potential we must continually engage in meaningful communication and provide for the exchange of ideas with respect for each point of view. We are hopeful this series will help bridge "the gap" and promote better understanding of the important issues facing our community.

Mr. Sheldon is a principal in SERA Architects.



The Eiffel Tower was built in 1889 to demonstrate the potential of steel as a new construction material.

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