



HISTORY COMMENTARY

Preservation Values, Education, and Literacy

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Historic Seattle, the organization for which I work, is privileged to have a historic home in which to meet and entertain the community. Ours is the 1907 Henry H. Dearborn residence, a classical revival house built with Dearborn's real estate profits. The Dearborn House was converted to an ophthalmologist's office in 1953-54. These alterations and a 1984 remodel by the cosmetic surgeon who then acquired the house are some of the challenges Historic Seattle has to deal with as we try to bring integrity back to the interiors.

But we do have to credit these businesses, for if they hadn't bought and used the house, it probably would have been demolished in the 1980s to make way for a condominium tower. With national, state, and county support, we have been able to repair and restore the property. In 2002 we did extensive paint analysis on the exterior and repainted the Dearborn House in its original 1907 color scheme. Our project inspired the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation to do the same with the Stimson-Green mansion to our north.

In November 2003 I was asked to address a meeting of the Governor's Mansion Foundation, which also has respect for a historic home, understands the need to grow in order to continue to serve, and recognizes and responds to its character, both outside and inside. Unfortunately, these attitudes reflect values that are far from the norm. At that presentation, as well as at a Heritage Caucus meeting in March 2004, I chose to focus attention on contemporary life and its impact on heritage, preservation, and our visual understanding of the world.

We are fast becoming a nation of well-educated young people who are, by and large, visually illiterate. Although technological advances have put the "virtual" world at people's fingertips and made historical, architectural, and preservation-related information and communication easier and more accessible than ever, the trade-off has been disconnection with the extraordinary qualities of the "real" world. We are bringing up a generation weaned on instant images jumping on and off movie, computer, and television screens. They barely have time to take in the color and shape of a thing before it vanishes and is replaced by something different. In this split-second world, subtleties and refinements vanish. The roughness or smoothness of stone, the ornamental bas relief in terra-cotta, the shades and textures of woven fabric, the curve of a wooden chair leg, the glow of a gold leafed frame—these are things that require time for observation. They may even need the touch of a finger or the sniff of the nose to gain your full appreciation.

There is little in cyberspace to test senses or challenge perceptions. The same is true for most of the place definers of modern-day life—huge billboards, plastic backlit signage, and over-scaled concrete warehouses with no subtlety or finesse. As an architectural historian, a historic

preservation advocate, and an educator, I worry about this. I am concerned that in the rush for the latest improvements in communication and information—now objectified as "data-sharing"—we are losing the capacity to use our gifts of observation, the "visual thinking" that is at the root of aesthetics.

Seattle has fallen into the trap of every world-class city "wannabe," which puts it in danger of becoming indistinguishable from countless other cities in America. It has cast its historic roots aside to accommodate the fad of the moment, which usually means bigger and more showy developments. Egocentric architectural statements completely ignore the traditional pattern of streetscapes and the scale of buildings already in place. Designers claim that the existing surroundings are "boring" and assume that they will be gone in a few years anyway. "Naming" opportunities turn any and every new civic enterprise into billboard.

Several years ago, I was asked by a journalist why I thought *Seattle* was such a conservative place architecturally. His question was motivated by the opening of Frank Gehry's Experience Music Project and the unveiling of plans for the new central library designed by Rem Koolhaas. I had to say that I did not see Seattle this way. In terms of its planning and design history, there have been some remarkably bold efforts. The plan by the Metropolitan Building Company for its Metropolitan Center in the first decade of the 20th century was years ahead of any similar comprehensive scheme for a unified urban commercial center. The earth-moving and filling projects in the Denny Regrade and throughout downtown by R. H. Thomson were radical approaches to accommodate future growth. L. C. Smith's audacious attempt to bring Manhattan to Seattle resulted in 1914 in the town's most significant downtown landmark, Smith Tower.

While the growing community resisted the move away from 19th-century traditions, a new generation of architects did just that. Albertson, Wilson, and Richardson exploited the regional metaphor of the monumental mountain in the Northern Life Tower in 1928. Inspired by his exposure to the work of Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, Paul Thiry in 1936 designed radical white stucco residences in traditional neighborhoods. An inspirational symbol of progress for the Century 21 Exposition—the Space Needle—continues to define Seattle throughout the world. There are other examples, from the Magnolia branch library by Kirk, Wallace, and McKinley to the structural engineering marvel of the recently demolished Kingdome—countless buildings that moved Seattle's cityscape successfully into the new millennium. If Seattle has an inferiority complex about its architectural accomplishments, it is because the city ignores and underappreciates the gems that are its residential neighborhoods, its magnificent park and boulevard system, and many architecturally and structurally distinctive—if not "world-class"—buildings.

Back to the journalist's take on the word "conservative"—I had to point out that is the word is not, in itself, a negative one. The dictionary meaning of conserve is "to keep from being damaged, lost, or wasted." To be conservative is to be moderate and prudent. It connotes a respect for the past and a cautious approach to accepting the new or the different. With a conservative approach, for example, Seattle would not have lost the White-Henry-Stuart Building, the Music Hall Theatre, or the Burke Building. Olympians would not have to be concerned about losing the Art Deco Greyhound bus station, the old Olympia Brewery, or the signature spaces in the Washington State Library. Spokane preservation advocates would not need to be constantly vigilant to safeguard their Rookery Building from being razed. The conservative approach has great merit. It prevents the quick and poorly considered dismissal of

small buildings on small but valuable lots because they are not "economically viable" and are not worth the effort to save in light of the economic potentials of the land and the location.

Why is it so important that Seattle, or any other city, be "world class"? "World class" appears to mean that the city loses most of the character-defining buildings that long-time residents appreciate—features that help form their collective memory of what makes the city unique. While our culture strives for world-class status, we are really settling for the lowest common denominator of taste and the loss of the quirky, idiosyncratic characteristics that distinguish the buildings, neighborhoods, and downtown districts of our cities.

Ironically, world-class also defines Seattle by some of its top tourist highlights, such as Pike Place Market and Pioneer Square—vestiges of the past that have largely survived because of city policies that protected them from ill-advised redevelopment. It seems that the very features that have drawn newcomers to the city in recent years—livability, close proximity to the natural environment, a colorful mix of interesting and different neighborhoods with attractive and affordable housing, and an accessible downtown—all are being sacrificed to make Seattle a world-class city.

In my eight years on the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board, I met homeowners with passion for their homes and businesses and a commitment to making changes without tampering with the defining features giving these properties integrity and harmony. I also frequently listened to the arguments of architects, school and library personnel, real estate developers, attorneys, and building managers who justified the replacement of wood windows with vinyl or wood shingles with composition roofing, and the gutting of historic interiors to meet educational requirements, seismic, fire, and zoning codes. I reviewed arrogant and inappropriate additions and alterations by architects who either didn't know or blatantly ignored the many clues their building offered up regarding how to proceed.

At Historic Seattle I am frequently asked to provide home-owners with recommendations for interior designers and architects to help them out when upgrading an old house. Frankly, I can count on my fingers the number of firms with the knowledge base and, more importantly, the passion to work with historic buildings. I wish there were more. But most people in the design professions are looking to follow the latest trends and to make their own new ones—without looking back.

Preservation and good stewardship are important values that distinguish communities. In September 2003 the Seattle showroom of the prestigious textile design firm Scalamandré partnered with Historic Seattle to promote the values of preservation at the Seattle Design Center. Pat Kreeger, the showroom manager, is fond of saying that she wants to "raise the bar" in the design community to the merits of historic architecture and interior treatments. The staff came up with five key ideas that people should understand before undertaking a restoration project: 1) do no harm, 2) respect the period, 3) preserve good old work, 4) do it right the first time, and 5) do your homework.

The late Patsy Bullitt Collins understood this. Patsy had strong values. She was outspoken when others remained silent and had unwavering patience to follow a worthwhile cause to a positive conclusion, even when naysayers lined her route. She also acted on her beliefs in quiet, modest ways that often went unnoticed. Nevertheless, her actions have had important and lasting positive benefits for the community.

I first met Patsy in 1986 when she purchased the First Hill home of her grandfather, C. D. Stimson, to the dismay of friends and family members who dubbed it a "white elephant." My friendship with her grew while we worked together to develop an architectural history of the Stimson family beginning in 1989. This effort was enriched by her encouragement of my work in public education as she became a friend and supporter of the preservation community. She gave so generously to Historic Seattle and the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation that both organizations now operate out of historic properties on First Hill. And she contributed substantially to the National Trust as have few others in this state.

In 1998, at a celebration marking the 25th anniversary of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Ordinance, Patsy said, "A community wants to and needs to remember the community's childhood, in the same way as individuals have need and joy remembering and being reminded and given mementos of their childhood. Buildings lost are like a book with its pages torn out." In her lifetime Patsy did more than her share to help us pass our "books" on intact to future generations. I encourage you, the reading public, to be the legislators, watchdogs, and civic leaders who are willing to take on the cause of preservation. I also challenge you in your personal and family lives to encourage young people to step away from the box—the computer, television, and movie screen—to experience, appreciate, and take on the stewardship of the landmark buildings we leave them.

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