

Empty Nest

City Hall's fir coat has gone out of style

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City Hall, I too dislike it - in its present state of disrepair. It depresses with neglect. And sad to say that what it represents, a 1960s version of small city government, just isn't valid anymore. This early-modernist, idealized square-doughnut of city services - fire, police, courts, administration, planning, and public meetings - all wrapped around a central courtyard - has run out of steam in more ways than one.

Eugene has grown and with it the need to have more adequate homes and unique buildings for its fire and police departments, which have now moved out. Both architecturally and functionally this can be a good thing. Each new public building, like the Hult Center, the Eugene Public Library, the Police Station and the new LCC complex, provides an opportunity for a vital city to reshuffle its service ensemble and refresh its public face. But what to do with the emptying nest that's left behind?

From the outside today City Hall exemplifies early-Modernism at its most boring, featuring stacked block concrete walls and block long facades of heavy wood screening derogatorily referred to as its "fir coat." I remember wondering what poor souls the long horizontal building housed when I first drove along 8th Ave. in 1970 and being disappointed that it was Eugene City Hall. Even when relatively new, the opaque wood screen looked more disproportionately mechanical than elegant, more committed to some runaway idea of unity or fealty than responding to soul and sun.

Buildings of this period, however, won prizes for being excessively conceptual and unrelievedly rational as City Hall is here with its one-stop-shopping "big concept" congruent with its circle-in-a-square geometry. Elevating the building on pilotis to provide structured parking underneath unfortunately also created an island out of City Hall, disconnecting all four sides from the bustle of city life.

Perhaps the most successful element of the design remains the circular council chambers at the center of the garden keep. This public room still offers a democratic setting that works quite well.

Other public meeting rooms like the McNutt Room have been too small and awkward for too long a time. Waiting outside under the conceptually unifying breezeway during cold weather months is a good example of how a "big idea"

doesn't necessarily keep one warm. Springfield's remodeled shopping center City Hall has for many years been a much friendlier and more comfortable place to meet.

Luckily for us, fur coats have gone out of style. Modernism has regained considerable warmth and moved on if not completely come in from the cold. Steam heating is no more. Fire and police have their own homes, making earthquake upgrading easier and more affordable. County and federal offices remain close by. Much good experience has been gained at overlaying whole new lives on such older buildings as Center Court, the Smeed Hotel, and the Granary to name just a few. And of course, recycling and reusing isn't just greener and more virtuous, it's also cheaper! So, BRING it on.

Why the reluctance to consider rehabilitating City Hall? One reason is that we don't always recognize modern as being historical because we've been immersed in our time's signature stylistic home. Stylistic eras tend to become clearer, however, when they're being left behind. Another is the way that the early Modern, with its intellectual emphasis on simple horizontal lines and machine-like efficiency, tended to eschew a humanity of form, detail, craftsmanship, and artistic finishes that made older buildings emotionally accessible and therefore harder to let go.

But there are armatures of opportunity that grow out of City Hall's very modernity. The simplicity and regularity of the underlying structural frame makes it all that much easier for the existing building to be economically undressed, reconfigured and remodeled.

A recent study by Poticha Architects shows how that process might accomplish some key community objectives. It demonstrates, for example, how the building might be opened up and connected with a plaza to 8th Ave. and Pearl St.; how the council chambers could be made more visible and symbolically important to the community; and ways that additional useful, and perhaps revenue producing space, could be added around the courtyard.

To my mind, this study, which would save the community millions, is still not quite bold enough. I propose we also shrink the central courtyard and cover it with a glass pyramid, creating an atrium that would transform the whole interior of the block. I'd like to be able to look across the 8th Ave "great street" entrance plaza at a council chambers shining for all to see beneath its glass hat. Now that would be a City Hall worthy of our own time and time and place.

City planner, Kevin Lynch, famously named this time-overlaying strategy a "temporal collage." Places that artfully remember themselves generate a richness of urban experience that people continue to pay to visit in cities all over the world.