



Courtesy of Lane County Historical Museum

Out With The Old

Eugene's disregard for preservation has left the city with just a handful of historic buildings.

BY STEPHEN MAHER

A casual walk around the city reveals a common and unmistakable theme: There are only a handful of old buildings left in Eugene. Most come to mind instantly. The Eugene Hotel. The Oregon Electric Station. The Ax-Billy Department Store building. The Palace Hotel.

Of the old buildings that still stand in the downtown core, just 11 were built before the Great Depression. And the Smeede Hotel, located at Seventh Avenue and Willamette Street, is the only one dating from the 19th century.

Most of the old buildings that once graced the downtown area were lost more than a decade or two ago when the urban renewal wrecking ball tore down their walls. Some had deteriorated in their old age, but others still boasted a strong foundation and sturdy walls. In their place rose buildings of concrete, aluminum and glass, in the splashy and sometimes bland architectural styles of the 1960s.

"In the mid-1960s, the federal government made an incentive of ur-

ban renewal of tearing down the old and putting in the new," says Carole Daly, chairwoman of the Eugene Historic Review Board. "The downtown was decaying in some manner within the city of Eugene. And so they were looking for what could be done to downtown to shore it up. And the answer at that time was you tear it all down and build all new."

"The urban renewal, as some preservationists say, tore the heart out of Eugene," says Jerry Jacobson, a planner with the City of Eugene who works closely with the Historic Review Board. "Some of the buildings were in pretty bad shape, and we don't know how many were significant and how many weren't, but yes, many buildings were lost."

The urban renewal programs were set off by events in the previous decades. During the Depression and World War II years, few buildings were constructed. But when the war ended, there was a building boom in the United States unmatched in recent times.

"The general feeling was that 'The war is over, we have to get moving, and this is in the public interest.' And that was what happened," says Elizabeth Potter, coordinator for National Register nominations for the state Historical Preservation Office.

"There was a need to build

something and create something after the destruction of the war. Psychologically that was very important. Plus there was still tax incentives to tear down older buildings," says Eric Eisemann, executive director of the Historic Preservation League of Oregon.

In Eugene, construction of the Downtown Mall served as the centerpiece of the federally supported urban renewal program. With upwards of \$20 million to spend, money wasn't an object. Bringing money in, however, was.

"The downtown was facing the loss of some of their major retail stores because of the opening of Valley River," says Daly. The decision to build the mall occurred just months before the \$15 million Valley River Center was completed in the Willakenzie area in 1969. Little heed was paid to the effect of Oregon's wet weather on an open mall.

Many jumped on the mall bandwagon in the early days of planning. The chairman of the Historic Structures Subcommittee of the Special Committee on Renewing Eugene told reporters that not one single building in the project area deserved to be preserved. The Register-Guard, the bastion of community thought in the late 1960s, similarly agreed. In a Dec. 22, 1968 editorial, the paper wrote, "Nothing succeeds like success. The present

renewal plan could easily prove to be just a good beginning on the conversion of Eugene from just-another-city conditions to many that will enhance its general livability and sightliness."

"The preservationist constituency back then wasn't really extremely vocal. It just happened. I can't remember hearing a big furor over that," Jacobson says.

There were some objections, however. In 1970, as work on the mall proceeded without a hitch, the Historic Preservation Committee wrote a letter to the Eugene Renewal Agency, which was acquiring city blocks and deciding their fate.

"It is shocking and in the nature of a cultural crisis that Eugene, the major city in the county, might consider eliminating all significant architectural records of the history and development of its downtown area, especially when it contains buildings nearly as old as the city," the letter read.

The preservation committee received little sympathy from the Eugene Renewal Agency. The director of the agency expressed the belief that much of the value of the buildings centered around nostalgia rather than architectural or historical worth.

In ensuing years, the buildings came down. The 57-year-old Wallis and 80-year-old Titus buildings in 1970; the Parmenter and Bangs buildings in

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