

1972; the Osborn Hotel in 1974; and the YMCA building and the Armory in 1976.

"If they were still here, they would have been very unique, very historic. The Osborn had a beautiful arch, had some tiles and was a beautiful old building," Jacobson says.

Yet not all the buildings in the core area were torn down. Some were saved and renovated, such as the Smeede Hotel, the Electric Station and the Tiffany Building. Still others were altered to blend in with the modern look of the mall.

"A lot of the buildings structurally were not torn down. But they were covered over with aluminum or glass or boxed in. So the decorative elements that would make it a distinctive building were destroyed and covered over," Eisemann says.

Today, there are those who question the wisdom of tearing down so many downtown buildings. According to Eisemann, the trouble started when Eugene jumped into the renewal programs head first.

"From my perspective as a preservationist and also as a person interested in future development, I think those com-

'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.'

— Carole Daly

munities that didn't buy into that in many ways are a lot better off, historically, architecturally and as far as the community fabric is concerned," he says. "If you look at Albany, Albany didn't buy into that as well as Eugene did. They have tremendous pride in their community and see it (historic preservation) as a way to promote economic development. And Eugene didn't do that.

"I think the mall wasn't as successful as people had hoped. Obviously it's being redone right now," he says.

"Hindsight is 100 percent, but it's a shame. There were probably some buildings that should have been preserved," says Robert Bennett, president of Bennett Management Co.

Realtors, a firm that renovated the old Alpha Tau Omega house on Oak Street, and the Downtown Athletic Club building (Old Ax-Billy department store).

Daly, however, believes Eugene faced different circumstances than towns such as Albany encountered during the urban renewal years.

"I don't think the Albany downtown core, since it was a small enough community, had really deteriorated in the sense that Eugene's had. So they weren't faced with having to tear it down and look at it because they didn't have the competing shopping centers," she says.

Like elsewhere around the nation, it wasn't until the mid-1970s that attitudes about historic preservation began to change in Eugene. The City Council passed a preservation ordinance in 1975 after architectural and historical groups urged the city to act in preserving historical buildings.

"A task force decided that a Historic Review Board and a historic ordinance should be created. And that was done," Jacobson says.

"Eugene was one of the early communities in the state of Oregon to pass a preservation ordinance," Potter says. Portland was the first city to do so in 1959, followed by Oakland, Oregon in 1968, Jacksonville in 1969, and Ashland, The Dalles and Eugene in 1975, according to Potter.

"Now we have more than 30 communities with historic preservation ordinances today. So Eugene was clearly among the early ones," she says.

The years from 1976 to 1981 have widely been called the "Age of Preservation" in the United States. Much of the credit for the resurgence in interest goes to the Bicentennial, which created a nostalgic mood in the country. But there were other reasons.

"The laws that were instituted in the '60s under the Great Society were just beginning to be felt. It took many years to get the federal and state programs up and running. And there were also preservation grants-in-aid, which were brick-and-mortar grants to rehabilitate property," Eisemann says.

"And in 1976, Congress changed the tax law so that a person could no longer get a tax incentive for tearing down a historic building. Prior to that time you got a 10 percent tax credit for demolishing a historic property."

The Oregon Legislature contributed its part by enacting a tax law that allowed a 15-year property tax assessment freeze on historic buildings. The law is still in effect, and according to Potter, allows property owners to spend the money they ordinarily would spend on increased taxes on improvements or restoration.

In Eugene, little renovation occurred between 1976 and 1981, the most notable exception being the remodeling of the Oregon Electric Station.

Then in 1981, Congress passed a tax law that allowed a 25 percent investment tax credit. It has proved to be a major incentive for preservation.

"If you look at the figures from the National Park Service about the dollar volume of projects that they've reviewed since 1976, it's staggering how much has been done since 1981. And

that's because of the investment tax credit program. There's been over \$8½ billion worth of private reinvestment in historic properties across the country. And clearly 70 percent of that has happened since 1981-82," Eisemann says.

The tax incentives and property tax assessment freeze in Oregon, however, have not stopped owners, organizations and developers from continuing to tear down buildings with historical and cultural value in Eugene. The most telling example of the state of the city's historical preservation was the Mayflower Theater debacle of a year ago.

With the desire to expand and build a new medical laboratory, Sacred Heart General Hospital bought the property where the 60-year-old theater stood in the fall of 1984. And under the West University Refinement Study, the hospital was allowed to grow north on 11th Avenue.

But when the Eugene Historic Review Board decided to hold a public hearing on whether the building should be designated a historical landmark, Sacred Heart beat them to the punch and demolished the building 33 hours before the board was to meet.

The outcry was unanimous and swift. Historic Review Board members were angry because they weren't allowed to make the decision. Neighbors accused the hospital of caring for their patients and not the community and acting "in bad faith."

"The board wanted an opportunity to at least review it and see if it had historical significance and make a decision and go from there. But it never got to that point," Jacobson says.

"I feel as if a vigilante crew has moved in and hung the building before a trial," Daly said at the time.

"We were kind of behind the eight ball all the time," she says today.

More than anything else, the action brought problems with the preservation ordinance and the board to the forefront. Only months earlier, the infamous Animal House, also known as the Patterson House, was torn down under strikingly similar conditions.

"It wasn't a designated landmark, although people knew that it was significant because of its association with Dr. (A.W.) Patterson. And all of a sudden the demolition permit was applied for and permitted, and the board heard about it, and they felt it was just too late. By the time they could have gone through the proceedings it would have been demolished. It's another example of how the way the present ordinance is worded, they are just powerless," Jacobson says.

Since the destruction of the buildings, the city has formed a task force to revamp the ordinance and perhaps reorganize the decision-making process. Currently, the Historic Review Board decides the fate of buildings, and the Planning Commission decides appeals to those decisions.

"One thing that's been talked about is the authority to put a stay of demolition if the Historic Review Board decides to investigate its historical significance," Jacobson says.



Photo by Bobbie Lo

The Palace Hotel, 488 Willamette St., houses a variety of shops and eateries today. It is one of six buildings on Willamette Street that are included on the National Register of Historic Places. In its heyday, Willamette Street was the commercial center of Lane County.