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architecture BY MICHAEL COCKRAM

City Hall 3.0

Memory loss and the 100 million-dollar-baby

Eugene has long outgrown its City Hall and with civic offices scattered around downtown the city is now studying alternatives for a new facility. The current City Hall, like its predecessor, will likely face the wrecking ball — another in a long line of Eugene's disposable buildings.

The price tag floating around is about \$100 million — that's a lot of cabbage. But it's about what it cost to embellish Autzen Stadium. Phil Knight won't be kicking in millions on this project, however — it will be up to the good folks of Eugene, so citizen involvement is critical. This project will be a symbol of who we are and what we want our city to be.

Eugene's architectural godfather and gadfly Otto Poticha called for the preservation of the existing building in his address to the City Club recently. Besides being too small, it doesn't meet current seismic standards. Perched up on the columns of the garage level, a sizable earthquake could be devastating. His idea is to stabilize the structure at the garage level and insert offices or other more street friendly uses.

In my last article (9/15) I bemoaned the destruction of the 1890s City Hall and characterized its replacement, the current building, as "faceless and aloof." The problems are down at the street level — the 8th and Mill street elevations are blank, visually impenetrable and raised above the man and woman on the street — exposing its unfortunate underbelly of parking. At night the dreary fluorescent-lit garage is all that the building projects.

But the existing building also has strengths — the innovative and symbolic layout of the central court and wonderful examples of modernist detailing. Otto suggests at least keeping the civic functions such as the council chambers at the current facility and placing the support functions to the city owned property to the south (a likely site for the new facility). The bridge between the two might allow a major facelift to the 8th Avenue elevation — perhaps shifting a transparent pedestrian friendly entry to the south. I believe that the flaws of the existing structure would justify major surgery, but not tearing it down.

An excellent recent example of how a modernist building can be treated is Rowell Brokaw Architects' building at 1 East Broadway. With a few subtle and tasteful moves highlighting its steel and glass framework, the building has been transformed into a striking addition to the streetscape of downtown.

Cities need built-in memories — their histories are written not only in words but

also in buildings. Significant buildings are landmarks to our culture. The many layers of Rome come to mind — but Corvallis gives some (less Romantic) insight closer to home. Corvallis' old City Hall still stands as an anchor in it's downtown — about the same vintage as Eugene's original building. Citizens and activists have made a valiant struggle to keep out the big box retailers and to keep much of the historic fabric of the town. And its downtown supports a variety of small locally owned shops — avoiding the pervasive vacancy that characterized downtown Eugene for so many years. Corvallis doesn't have a mall.

Then there's the principle of reuse — of saving not only cultural resources but physical resources as well. Principles don't always describe the most practical path but



Eugene's 1890s City Hall (above) was razed to build a modern new City Hall, a circle-within-a-square design. What will be next?



they push us toward more responsible ways of building and living. City governments should operate on principles as well as the principle bottom line.

Architects have to take part of the responsibility. We need to design buildings and building components that are flexible, reusable and expandable. A hopeful sign for the new project is the selection of a strong design team for the new project. Thom Hacker is the chief architect — a former resident of Eugene and one of the Northwest's most respected designers. The local firm of Solaray, with its strong energy and sustainable design credentials, will also be part of the team.

At some point we have to value the things we make. In another 50 years, when the number (and building) crunchers call for the destruction of the structure we're about to build, we want a City Hall that the citizens will stand in front of the bulldozers to save.

Michael Cockram is a Eugene architect, free-lance writer and adjunct assistant professor of architecture.