

CITY CITY BANG BANG

HOW HAMMERING AWAY AT CITY HALL COULD RESTORE AND IMPROVE THE ICONIC BUILDING

BY SHANNON FINNELL

City Hall was a lauded public building when it was built in 1964, with wood fins symbolizing Oregon's connection to the forests, a very public terrace and a design that bubbled with democratic values and encouraged a connection between government and citizenry that wasn't dominated by an imposing tower.

But after years rusting in the garage, Eugene's own City Chitty Bang Bang might be razed rather than remade into something special.

Earthquake issues (aka seismic inadequacies) plus the end of steam heat and a decade without structural (or even cosmetic) maintenance mean the building, as it stands, has to go. Now the Eugene City Council faces an as-of-yet-unscheduled decision: Knock down City Hall and build a new one, or strip the structure to its skeleton, repair it and rebuild an improved version?

Because City Hall is no magic car, and the issue of what to do with it is too tough a decision without an in-depth study, the city formed a citizens' committee to examine its options. Between budget, square footage, sustainability and historical value, a rebuilt city hall seems like a winner, without the risks and unanswered questions that would come with a partnership with a developer. And yes, it could even be a *pretty* City Chitty Bang Bang again.

Two teams of architects created reports on both rebuilding and building new, then adjusted them based on citizens' committee feedback. These studies don't hold all the details of what exactly would be built under each scheme; they are merely the committee's conceptualizations, created to help City Council make a decision based on real information before it moves forward by commissioning real plans.

BEAUTY & THE PITS

Kevin Matthews, editor of *ArchitectureWeek*, says that the spirit of Eugene City Hall's original design is lost under peeling paint, and that renovations have obscured the original design, making it feel less open and as if it's lost its entry marker. Matthews says a rebuild of City Hall would be an example of what's known as a re-skinning, where the aesthetics are stripped of "messy things that have happened over time" and beautified in new ways that are more in keeping with the original design. "Some of the most exciting spaces to be in are old spaces that have been updated so that there's an interplay between old materials and new materials," he says.

David Mandelblatt, a Downtown Neighborhood Association member who participated in the citizens' committee, says that although the new building was an attractive option, he favors rebuilding the historic structure with modifications to make it more open from a street perspective. Mandelblatt says that creating more square feet inside City Hall is the best use of limited dollars, adding that taking the risk of having something created by developers which could be left aesthetically unfinished troubled him. "I felt, and I think that other people did as well, that we'd actually get a fuller product sooner," he says of the rebuild. "And that was important."

Paying for "shelled space" now — space that appears finished on the outside, with the interior just finished enough to rent or finish later — was also an attractive option to Mandelblatt. He prefers it to developing more space in the future with funds that might never come, while also spending money on office rent for other city departments downtown. He says the rebuilt space could house either retail or city staff when their current leases run out in the next decade. "I see it as a plus because it gives you flexibility for the future," he says.

Mandelblatt says that one of the principles guiding his

thought process was ensuring that the space would be used to its best potential. He says he doesn't think leveraging the space with a developer for retail or office space should trump using it for city staff and public meeting space. "More competition for space, with so much new space just created, that makes me nervous," he says. "I'm afraid of a failure. Downtown deserves better."

According to Matthews, there's another benefit to re-skinning: sustainability.

CONCRETE GREEN MACHINE

"When you take a concrete structure like we have at City Hall and put insulation on the outside of that concrete, then you already have a really good start at making an efficient and comfortable building, particularly for a climate like ours that has relatively neutral temperature swings," Matthews says. The concrete behaves as a part of the interior of the building and acts as free insulation itself, he says.

This would be an incredibly expensive thing to do from scratch, and Matthews says that's part of why using the existing building proves to be energy efficient, as well as providing a unique architectural style that wouldn't be built today due to the cost of the concrete frame. "There's no fundamental reason that you can't take that building and create a super efficient building energy-wise," he says.

"The bottom line is that it's not sustainable to tear down a building with a good existing structure just to build a new building for the same purpose," Matthews says. "That's just completely unsustainable."

The rebuild option presented to the citizens' committee also contained plans to build a roof on the 7th Avenue side that could accommodate a solar array in the future.

The build-new option, according to the study, would minimize energy use by being compact, thin and oriented east-west to use daylight.

