

FRANK VISCONTI



Urban Delight

A **NEW YORK ARCHITECT** SEES EUGENE WITH FRESH EYES By Bob Keefer

Writing sometime around the year 30 B.C., the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio — Vitruvius, to his friends — laid out, in his foundational work *De Architectura*, three principles that should inform all architecture: *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas*.

More than 2,000 years later, Eugene architect Frank Visconti translates those Latin terms as “firmness,” meaning that a building is structurally sound; “commodity,” meaning that it’s functional; and “delight.”

“That’s the joy that one gets out of it,” Visconti says.

Visconti, who works at Rowell Brokaw Architects in Eugene, came here two and a half years ago from New York City, drawn by that Vitruvian factor he found here in Oregon.

“I am a New Yorker in every sense of the word,” he says. “And I think Eugene is very delightful. It has all the elements of an urban experience, but on such a tiny scale — 160,000 people versus 11 million. Everything here is only 15 minutes away.”

I called Visconti to ask him a couple questions about design in general and about the quality of architecture he sees in Eugene.

Is design generally appreciated by the public? I wanted to know.

To my surprise, he says “yes.”

“I do think it’s appreciated on many levels,” he says. “Some of them might be more subversive or more obvious.”

On the largest scale, he says, architecture defines the entire urban experience. “It influences the amount of sunlight that comes into the streets and the open spaces,” he says. “It has to do with the quality of materials. And it has been important since the built environment was conceived as a bigger idea.”

On a smaller scale, he says, architecture influences what you see out your bedroom window. “You want light and air,” he says. “You want the window facing a certain direction. Something as simple as orientation to the sun is important to design.”

The killer question: Is Eugene ugly, as so many critics claim?

“I find it a vibrant place,” he says. “Though there’s certainly lots of potential.”

Visconti expanded on that idea in an interesting direction.

Eugene has long lived with the legacy of 1970s redevelopment, in which many older downtown buildings were demolished to make way for what would ultimately be a failed pedestrian mall.

In most accounts, that was an architectural disaster, replacing the elegance of history with the prefab look of more-modern buildings. Not so for Visconti.

Eugene, he says, “is a time capsule of the ’70s in some ways. It’s very clean and well taken care of. It’s a slice of time rooted in 30 or 40 years ago.”

More broadly, he describes Eugene as embracing a style that might be called “optimistic modern.”

“It’s a start-up city,” he says, and then mentions the best-selling 1989 computer game SimCity, in which the player controls the development of a virtual city. “Eugene is the early stage of a Sim city.”

The city does have potential yet unrealized.

“It has a vibrancy that’s rooted in Broadway and Willamette Street and the Hult Center,” he says. “And it has the Whit — a fantastic neighborhood, a classic bohemian edgy part of town where there is a lot of culture and personal expression.”

The biggest issue that needs solving, he says, is housing.

“The city should do whatever it can to promote more market-rate and affordable housing so that more people live downtown.” ■

STUDENT HOUSING EYESORES

Years ago, the city of Eugene implemented a tax break in an effort to create more affordable housing. The Multi-Unit Property Tax Exemption (MUPTE) was put in place in 1978. It gave multi-unit housing projects in the center of Eugene a tax exemption — a solid effort to address an affordable housing crisis in our town.

But instead of affordable housing units, we got ugly and unaffordable student housing.

Projects like Capstone’s 13th & Olive, and The 515 (formerly Hub Eugene) created massive, cheaply produced eyesores instead of affordable housing. What’s more, these complexes have very expensive rent and charge per person instead of per lease. The 515 charges \$1,099 for a studio apartment “per installment/per person,” according to its website. 13th & Olive charges \$1,590 to \$1,690 for a two bedroom apartment — far higher than the average cost of such an apartment in Eugene.

And these exorbitant costs don’t even begin to address

the effect that 13th & Olive has had on downtown. When Capstone sought the MUPTE tax break, it agreed to create a mixed-use building and create sidewalks that matched the rest of the city.

Anyone who walks past the building knows that the sidewalks are made of strange rubber squares that are stapled to the ground. They can be easily lifted and removed and, indeed, some of them have gone missing. The lowest floor is made up of apartments — not offices or businesses that could revitalize downtown, but the bedrooms of hapless college students who will never get true privacy.

This blight of a building radiates heat in summer, creating an inhospitable environment for pedestrians. It’s often best to go around the building to avoid the heat rays.

The 515 has also created a bit of a traffic problem because of its position on the north side of busy Broadway. Instead of a pedestrian bridge, there’s now

a crosswalk across the five lanes of traffic. The metallic building appears to have astroturf rectangles stapled to the side of it.

Thankfully, the Eugene City Council revised MUPTE in 2015, excluding student housing from the program. The ugliness of Eugene’s student housing, however, is here to stay. — Kelly Kenoyer

