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Good outcome for Astoria's library

Mixed-use building on Heritage Square carries two benefits

The Astoria City Council's Monday decision to build a new library on Heritage Square, as part of a mixed-use building, makes sense. In fact, it's an idea that was nascent around 15 years ago when Astorians gathered at the Columbia River Maritime Museum for a visioning session about the future of what was then called the Safeway block. The stand-out favorite which emerged from that process was a mixed-use building.

In a nutshell, the concept is a public space — a library — on the ground floor, with other retail, offices on the second floor and workforce housing on floors above.

This is not a new concept. Downtown Astoria — largely built in 1923 — has retail on the ground floor and housing above.

For the city of Astoria, mixed use on Heritage Square has two distinct benefits. With housing, offices, retail and a public use, the building would bring density and new vitality to downtown. The other positive is that mixed use can tap more than one capital investment and revenue stream. Libraries are ripe for philanthropic gifts and grants. Private developers will find the other spaces an attractive investment. There is public investment available for urban housing. A ground-floor retailer will provide a revenue stream.

There is power in building a new library space rather than living with the limiting factors of the current space as well as the adjoining Waldorf Hotel.

The most curious aspect of the council's deliberations on the library's future is the role of Larry Taylor, the defeated candidate for mayor. Derrick DePledge reported Tuesday that, "While the (library) debate has been about preservation, there is a political ingredient. Larry Taylor, the Intel technology manager who lost to LaMear in November, has been involved in both the campaign to save the Waldorf and the more recent appeal on behalf of the existing library." Defeated candidates deal with their disappointment in different ways.

Heritage Square would be a good outcome for the city's library. A mixed-use development would be excellent.

LNG rears its scary head

Do we want to be a West Coast colony for a New York company?

The triumph of money over democracy is a theme of the modern age. We are close to seeing whether that will be the outcome of a decision to turn parts of Clatsop County into a liquefied natural gas export terminal and pipeline.

As outlined by our news story Wednesday, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is completing a draft environmental impact statement for the Skipanon Peninsula terminal and 87-mile pipeline that would connect it with the regional LNG distribution network. A final EIS will follow, correcting any technical details and incorporating public comments about the draft, with document completion expected early in 2016.

FERC has substantial power in this process, granted by Congress, in theory to facilitate national interests by getting energy products to and from where they are needed. Carrying out "coordinated national energy policy" envisions not allowing local or regional feelings to get in the way. Nevertheless, on a scientific basis FERC will be no more biased than any other large federal agency and may conclude that building massive LNG facilities in the direct path of periodic massive tsunamis is not a great idea.

On a more immediate basis, the Columbia River bar remains dangerous despite a robust Coast Guard presence, late autumn and winter wind storms fairly often reach hurricane strength, and the Columbia estuary is jammed with small commercial and recreational fishing boats for weeks at a time. This is the migratory bottleneck for migrating salmon, steelhead, smelt, shad and other species. A large new industrial site in the midst of all this warrants strict examination.

Whether FERC is genuinely able to objectively weigh all these considerations is an open question. Like all such bodies, it both draws personnel from the industry it regulates and cycles employees into those industries. They are not in the business of saying "no."

Oregon agencies, as well as federal ones such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and NOAA Fisheries, must be zealous in ensuring that energy profits and hypothetical national energy interests don't overwhelm other legitimate issues. These factors must be part of the decision to forcibly install LNG as a new neighbor for the people and wildlife that have long committed to live here. So, too, must the possibility that the presence of LNG here would serve as the foothold for other heavy industry along what is now a remote rural shoreline.

Are Clatsop County residents united in opposing Oregon LNG's plans? No. But recent county commission elections have evidenced a preference for officeholders who have made clear their doubts about the project. Nor are all residents opposed to new heavy industry here. Under circumstances in which new neighbors demonstrate a firm commitment to preserving the values that draw and keep residents here, most new industries would be welcomed.

However, Oregon LNG, a subsidiary of Leucadia National Corp., a New York-based holding company, has long since abandoned any pretense of community outreach or inclusion. A corporation that does not return local phone calls cannot be expected to become a respectful and accommodating new neighbor.

We do not want to be a New York company's West Coast colony.

The giant rats that save lives

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF
New York Times News Service

Nicholas Kristof/The New York Times

A Gambain pouched rat — dubbed "HeroRats" by their handlers, searches a minefield near Malanje, Angola, March 13. Land mine detection can be a dreadfully slow and inefficient task, and the rats, trained to detect the scent of explosives, are a radical innovation.

MALANJE, Angola — I'm walking in a minefield here in rural Angola, tailing a monster rat.

This is a Gambian pouched rat, a breed almost 3 feet from nose to tail, the kind of rat that gives cats nightmares. Yet this rat is a genius as well as a giant, for it has learned how to detect land mines by scent — and it's doing its best to save humans like me from blowing up.

These rodent mine detectors have been dubbed HeroRats, and when you're in a minefield with one that seems about right. You're very respectful, and you just hope this HeroRat doesn't have a stuffed nose.

Nicholas Kristof

I'm here because five years ago, my kids gave me a HeroRat for a Father's Day present through GlobalGiving.org. I didn't actually take physical possession (fortunately!) but the gift helped pay to train the rat to sniff out explosives. And now I've come to minefields of rural Angola to hunt for my rat.

There are 39 HeroRats here, and they underscore the way the aid world is increasingly embracing innovative approaches to old challenges.

I've seen land-mine detection in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and it's dreadfully slow and inefficient. Typically, men in body armor walk in precise rows holding metal detectors in front of them. Whenever they come across metal, they stop and painstakingly brush away the soil until they see what it is.

Usually it's an empty AK-47 cartridge or a nail. Sometimes there is metal every few inches. Each time, the whole process stops until the soil can be brushed away.

In contrast, the rats scamper along on leashes. They respond only to the scent of explosives, so scrap metal doesn't slow them down.

At this minefield, which is full of metal objects, a human with a metal detector can clear only about 20 square meters a day. A rat can clear 20 times as much.

"Rats are also more reliable," said Alfredo Adamo, a field supervisor here. "With humans, concentration wanes after a while, but rats just sniff away."

The rats are paid in bananas, peanuts, avocados and apples, and they don't need body armor — partly because they're too light to set off land mines. (They can still weigh up to 2.5 pounds, which is a lot of rat when you're face to face.)

I think I found my rat: a scraggly codger named Boban who is just the right age to have been trained when my kids sponsored the rat.

Bart Weetjens, a Belgian product designer, started the HeroRat program after puzzling about how to improve mine detection. As a boy, Weetjens had kept rats as pets, and he came across an article about the use of gerbils for tasks involving scent detection.

Weetjens then consulted rodent scholars, who suggested Gambian pouched rats, in part because they compensate for very weak eyes with a superb sense of smell. They are called "pouched" not because they are marsupials but because they fill their cheeks with nuts and other goodies, and then bury them underground — relying upon scent to recover their caches later. Another advantage of Gambian pouched rats is that they have an eight-year life span that offers a lengthy return on the nine months of training needed to detect land mines.

The rats are paid in bananas, peanuts, avocados and apples.

So Weetjens started an aid group, Apopo, that trains the rats in Tanzania and then deploys them to minefields in various countries. Apopo is also now branching off into using HeroRats to detect tuberculosis — a disease of poverty that kills 1.5 million people a year around the world.

A huge challenge with tuberculosis is diagnosis. It takes a trained health worker with a microscope all day to examine about 25 samples of sputum to determine if they are positive for tuberculosis.

In contrast, a HeroRat can screen 100 samples in 20 minutes — ambling along a row of petri dishes, sniffing at each, and pausing when one is positive for tuberculosis. The rats are also much more accurate than a human with a microscope. In the clinics where HeroRats are now doing the detection (their diagnoses confirmed by humans in labs), the number of tuberculosis patients identified has risen 48 percent — meaning that more patients are diagnosed and treated, preventing the disease's spread.

Apopo pampers the rats, which get better health care than most Angolans. The rats work only a couple of hours a day (they get hot in midday), and they retire at age 6 when they become less dependable.

"We debated what to do with them after retirement," Adamo recalls. "It would be very unfair to just, er," — he paused slightly, embarrassed, looking for a euphemism — "get rid of them."

So the HeroRats spend their golden years nibbling on avocados and hanging out with their handlers. When the time comes, the handlers lay them to rest in a rodent cemetery, with several people present to pay respects.

To me, HeroRats are an example of an explosion of innovation taking place in the philanthropic world — and seeing large gains in productivity as a result.

Apopo is also an example of aid groups connecting donations to particular tasks in a way that donors can easily relate to. Through Apopo.org, you can "adopt" a HeroRat for $84 a year. Take it from me, this makes a terrific Mother's Day or Father's Day present!

Hollywood stars trump Harvard brains

By FRANK BRUNI
New York Times News Service

Call me an idealist, but I'd like to think that the halls of higher education are less vulnerable to the siren calls of fame and fortune than other byways of American life are.

I'd like to believe in a bold dividing line between academic virtues and celebrity values, between intellectual and commercial concerns.

Frank Bruni

But Henry Louis Gates Jr., a renowned Harvard professor, and Mehmet Oz, a surgeon on the faculty at Columbia, get in my way.

I link the two because they're both in the news, not because they're equally in thrall to the television camera or identically unabashed peddlers of something other than fact. Oz is by far the more compromised figure. But Gates, too, exemplifies what happens when a lecturer is bathed in bright lights and gets to hang with Ben Affleck, who will soon be on-screen in Batman's billowing cape.

Affleck was a guest last October on the PBS documentary series "Finding Your Roots," in which Gates takes luminaries — Sting, Stephen King, Angela Bassett — on journeys into their pasts. Affleck signed up for the trip.

But when he learned that he had a slave-owning ancestor, he asked that the detail be excised, according to communications between Gates and his friend Michael Lynton, the chief executive of Sony Entertainment. Their exchange was part of the hacked Sony emails recently shared by WikiLeaks.

"We've never had anyone ever try to censor or edit what we found," Gates wrote to Lynton, going on to fret over the "integrity" of the series. "He's a megastar. What do we do?"

Gates left the detail out.

After the disclosure of this late last week, he insisted, unpersuasively, that the cut reflected nothing more than the need to make room for other ancestors of Affleck's who warranted inclusion in the episode.

Regardless, it exposed Gates, a trusted authority on the African-American experience, to accusations that he'd sold out. It diminished him.

But wasn't that inevitable from the moment he hitched scholarship to show business?

"We conflate what a PBS special is with academic work," Carol Anderson, who teaches at Emory University, told Jamil Smith in *The New Republic*. "We have to understand that so much of what we see there is packaged for a nonacademic audience that wants the picture of really deep, intellectual discussion but is not quite ready for what that means."

What does the audience of *The Dr. Oz Show* want?

To judge by what Oz gives them, it's winnowed thighs, amulets against cancer and breathless promises of "magic" and "revolutionary" breakthroughs.

Oz has morphed not just willingly but exuberantly into a carnival barker. He's a one-man morality play about the temptations of mammon and the seduction of applause, a Faustian parable with a stethoscope.

Dr. Oz has morphed ... exuberantly into a carnival barker.

Many Americans probably had no idea that he remained affiliated with Columbia — he's vice chairman of its surgery department — until they read last week about an email sent to the university by 10 physicians around the country. They accused him of "promoting quack treatments" for "personal financial gain" and urged Columbia to sever its ties with him.

He's expected to defend himself on television later this week, and his publicity machine has gone into overdrive, seeking to discredit the physicians and frame the issue as one of free speech.

But don't forget that he was called before a U.S. Senate panel last year to explain his on-air gushing about green coffee extract, raspberry ketones and other faddish weight-loss supplements. Admonishing him, Sen. Claire McCaskill noted that "the scientific community is almost monolithic" in its rejection of "products you called 'miracles.'"

AP Photo/Lauren Victoria Burke, File

Dr. Mehmet Oz, vice chairman and professor of surgery, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington in June.

Also remember that the *British Medical Journal* published a study of scores of his show's medical recommendations, saying more than half didn't have sound scientific backing.

And bear in mind that the Sony emails included one that showed Oz to be eager, as Vox reported, "to use his platform on the show to help expand Sony's fitness and health-tracking devices market." Sony is one of the producers of *Dr. Oz*.

But well beyond Oz, there's an unsettling corruption of academia by celebrity culture.

Many professors do double duty as television pundits, even though sound bites, which are inherently unsubtle, run counter to what scholarship exalts. And educational institutions choose speakers largely — and sometimes solely — for their star power. The University of Houston spent $155,000 to schedule Matthew McConaughey for its commencement next month.

Maybe he's more learned than we realize. Or maybe erudition counts for less than buzz, even in those enclaves that are supposed to be about deep, durable things.