



Photographs by Elizabeth Mylott

Endangered structure, the Morris Marks house is one of the few remaining examples of Italianate residential architecture in downtown Portland. It is located at 1134 SW 12th Avenue.

The Preservation Perplex

Finding the Balance Between Our Past and Future

by Elizabeth Mylott

“Yes, there is a city where old warehouses are recycled as condos and offices, streetcars efficiently trundle passengers between home and work and people are polite.”

James Conway’s September 2005 description of Portland in *Preservation* typifies the city’s image as a place where innovative planning has created an exceptional and impressive urban landscape. Portland prides itself on being uniquely livable. Known for clean streets, urban parks and a laid back lifestyle, for many it’s the very model of a successful city. Public transportation is widely used, the city’s downtown remains vibrant, and smaller neighborhood commercial centers provide big draws for shopping and entertainment. Local natural amenities are widely enjoyed, as residents flock to urban parks and natural areas outside the city. As a result, the metroscape is growing rapidly. The increase in population can be seen in the thriving construction industry and the plans for a new MAX line.

It is during periods of rapid growth and change that communities must define themselves, strengthening their futures through deliberate and structured development. In many ways the metroscape excels in urban planning. However, our success is not clear in the preservation of historic resources. Citing the popular local chain McMenumins and several unidentified buildings in the Pearl District, Conway lauds locals for successfully embracing historic preservation. But in reality, the majority of buildings in the Pearl are not historic warehouses retrofitted for new lives as luxury condos and trendy commercial spaces, but rather new buildings with architectural elements that simply allude to the area’s industrial past. The few historic buildings that have been converted along with the small but successful McMenumins chain suggest the potential for adaptive reuse, but what have we really done in the way of historic preservation?



Photograph courtesy of Portland Center Stage

Preservation success stories: the Simon Benson house, originally at SW 11th and Clay has been restored and is now located on the Portland State University campus; and the First Regimental Armory, the new home of the Portland Center Stage Theater.

Examples of Historic Buildings in Need of Saving

Today many of our most beautiful and significant buildings are in danger of being lost.

Kesser Israel Synagogue 136 SW Meade St.	Originally built by the Immanuel Baptist State church in 1888, this historic building was converted to Kesser Israel Synagogue in 1912. The oldest Synagogue in the State of Oregon it incorporates Romanesque and Gothic elements.
Morris Marks House 1134 SW 12th Ave.	In downtown Portland between the South Park Blocks and Goose Hollow sits the Morris Marks House. A regal Italianate once at home in a neighborhood of upper-middle class homes, the Morris Marks House is now dwarfed by high-rise development. The neighborhood is much denser than it used to be and moving the house would allow for increased residential density while preserving the architecturally significant building.
Multnomah County Courthouse 1021 SW 4th Ave.	Concern over the stability of the 1914 Multnomah County Courthouse (a National Register landmark) continues to be one of the most important preservation-related issues being covered by the local media. Currently, the county is looking at various options for replacing the aging building.

Examples of Buildings That Have Successfully Been Saved or Are in the Process of Preservation

These buildings have been added to the list of historic gems and successful renovations and restorations in the region.

Bickel Block 33 NW Couch St.	Built in 1883, the four story Bickel Block in Old Town is constructed of factory-made cast-iron. Once the current renovation is underway, the building will be occupied by the University of Oregon.
1st Regimental Armory 128 NW 11th Ave.	The historic Armory in Portland's Pearl District recently reopened as the new home of the Center Stage Theater Company, adding new life to a unique historic building and a valuable cultural resource to the city.
Public Services Building 920 SW 6th Ave.	Originally built in 1928, this stately Italianate in the center of downtown Portland was remodeled in 1947, 1957, and 1999. The 1957 remodel included adding ten stories to the wings, bringing them to their present height of 12 stories.
Old Church 1422 SW 11th Ave.	Built in 1883, this Gothic structure in downtown Portland was almost demolished in the late 1960s. Saved by the efforts of the volunteer group, the Old Church Society, the Church now hosts a range of events, including weddings, conferences, concerts and exhibitions.



Conservation

Each year the Build it Green Tour showcases area buildings that act as examples of eco-friendly, sustainable development. The 2006 tour includes a 1907 farmhouse that has undergone a complete ecological renovation, including new floors constructed of reclaimed Yellow Pine from bleachers, a 100-year-old bungalow whose roof was raised to create a second story without altering the original architectural style, and another bungalow built in 1912. The 2005 tour featured several historic homes, including an 1889 Queen Ann Victorian in Southeast Portland fitted with a rainwater harvesting system, solar water heater, and solar photovoltaic system. The improvements have allowed the home to retain its historic charm while incorporating the owner's commitment to sustainability. A second Southeast home, a 1916 Craftsman, was added to the tour to showcase the kitchen remodeled with reclaimed Douglas fir cabinets. Across the river in the West Hills, another stop on the tour showcases a 55-year-old ranch house with rainwater storage for potable water, water efficient appliances, passive solar heating, and radiant floor heating. Two of the stops include homes that were saved from demolition and moved new locations. On North Albina, two homes slated for demolition were moved and turned into a fourplex, featuring salvaged floors and doors, in addition to other eco-friendly remodeling. The second is a home built in Lair Hill in 1886 that was moved to a moorage in Multnomah Channel where it's currently being remodeled for a new life as an eco-friendly houseboat. While these houses have been altered from their original state to incorporate the latest advances in eco-friendly building, the homeowners started with the basic premise of sustainability – they recycled.



Top: Kesser Israel Synagogue, on Meade Street in southwest Portland.

Below: Early congregants.

Courtesy of the Oregon Jewish Museum

Neighborhoods

One challenge for preservationists is choosing which buildings are worth saving. In some cases, the historic and architectural significance of a building is obvious, even when the building is in a state of disrepair. At other times, the choices are not as clear and the building needs to be placed in context. Historic preservation is not just about buildings; it's also about neighborhoods. What makes a collection of buildings a distinct neighborhood? In many cases it's architectural integrity. Destroying a building or adding a building with an inappropriate architecture can compromise a neighborhood's character. Imagine, for example, jamming a modernist glass structure between the historic homes in Ladd's Addition. Historic neighborhoods have a unique element lone historic buildings lack: their ability to fully evoke another time. A neighborhood is more than its buildings; it is also the lot design and layout, the landscaping, and street widths. Walk through a historic neighborhood and you can feel its history, imagining the lives of the people who came before. The built environment acts as a map to a city's past. The changing development patterns seen when the electric trolley was first introduced or when streets were widened to accommodate automobiles physically remind us of who we were and what we valued.

In Yamhill County, McMinnville's historic downtown is both a cultural asset and an economic boon. Restaurants, boutiques, specialty shops, and businesses are housed in 100-year-old buildings. Not only does the area attract shoppers and tourists but also acts as a community space where local residents gather for summer concerts, a farmers market, and other events.



Ladd's Addition in southeast Portland.



Historic downtown McMinnville.



Laurelhurst Park in southeast Portland.

Officers Row in Vancouver provides another example of a historic district whose preservation has enriched the area. In the late 1970s, the historic homes along the northern edge of Evergreen Boulevard had fallen into disrepair. Once the stately homes of military families, the buildings had become eyesores. The city acquired the property from the U.S. Army for a dollar and set about rehabilitating the buildings. After an eight year restoration, Officer's Row was fully restored to its original splendor. Today the National Historic District is home to 34 residential units, a hotel, and the Vancouver Visitors Center.

Portland more than anything is a city of neighborhoods. With more than 100 active neighborhood associations, Portlanders have a high level of investment in place at scales both large and small. Across the city, neighborhoods are defined both by their residents and their architecture. The mid-rise brick apartment buildings and cultural institutions lining the PSU park blocks, the historic homes and wide tree lined streets centered on the beautiful Laurelhurst Park: each of these neighborhoods has a high level of architectural cohesion. Breaking that fluidity has detrimental effects.

Two neighborhoods struggling to retain the architectural and spatial integrity that make them distinct are Buckman and Reedwood, both in Southeast Portland. Bordered on one side by busy streets and on another by an industrial district, Buckman is a neighborhood of large historic homes close to downtown that has long been fighting outside pressures. During the 1980s, residents of Buckman came together to fight a threat in the shape of motel-style apartments and today they are once again fighting against developers trying to introduce architecturally inappropriate condos.

The homes in Reedwood, mostly one story ranch houses, were built during the 1950s and 1960s and their architecture and landscape design embody a particular historical moment and feeling. Reedwood is in danger of losing its cohesion as some want to subdivide lots and increase density through new construction. In 2005, residents began working to get the neighborhood added to the National Register of Historic Places, and their fight is a great example of people working to save an area while it is still intact. Too much historic preservation happens when all that is left is one or two buildings sitting amid a new and different architectural landscape. Barely 50 years old, Reedwood may seem to some too new or not interesting enough to save, but it is precisely at this point when the most can be done.



Reedwood, near Reed College, departs from Portland streetcar neighborhoods as it was developed with no side-walks.



Reedwood neighborhood's distinctive residential architecture of the 1950s and 1960s. Is it worth landmarking?



Portland Hotel at SW Sixth and Morrison, circa 1895.
OHS neg. # 1801.



Portland Hotel, during its demolition in 1951.
OHS neg. #35808.



The grand Portland Hotel once stood where Pioneer Courthouse Square is located today.

Much of our historic architecture has already been lost. Like many areas across the country, the metroscape gutted historically significant buildings during the 1950s and 1960s to make way for renewal projects. Now historic buildings are threatened again, but this time by a good economy and high demand for premium urban land.

It is easy to see the mistakes of the past. Old photographs of the region are full of beautiful historic buildings that were lost due to lack of foresight. The Loewenberg-Leadbetter Mansion at SW Park Place, just below Washington Park, is one example. Built in 1894, this 32-room mansion was the pre-eminent Richardsonian design to be constructed in Portland. Featuring a three story tower, stone gables and a corner turret, the home was demolished in 1960. Today motel-style apartments sit on the plot where it was once located. The eight-story Portland Hotel is another example. This hotel, centrally located in the heart of downtown, contained more than 300 sleeping rooms, a restaurant, ballroom, billiard room, bar, sitting rooms, dining rooms, sewing rooms, a reception room, ladies parlors, public restrooms, public telephones, a news and cigar stand, Western Union telegraph office, quarters for live-in staff, and elevators. This magnificent structure, which cost more than \$1 million to build in 1890 and consisted of more than four million bricks, was demolished to build a parking garage.

As the metroscape continues to grow and change, planners should consider the preservation of historic resources, both individual homes and entire neighborhoods. Saving our past will help us meet many of our already articulated goals: conservation, recycling, livability, and community. **M**

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The Bickel Block at 33 NW Couch Street in Old Town is considered by preservationists to be endangered.