



The Oregonian

Recycling the Armory

A sparkling new theater complex pours into an ordinary old building -- done the Oregon way

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Blame it on the Bottle Bill.

Oregon's historic 1971 law requiring a 5-cent deposit on drink bottles began a new relationship between Oregonians and their used containers. It started with soda pop and beer. Now it's a cultural ethic that has put Portland at the forefront of reuse, from Free Geek old computer parts to South Waterfront's inner-city industrial land.

At least that's one way to explain what may stand as Portland's most ambitious recycling project yet: the \$36 million transformation of the 1891 First Regiment Armory into the Bob and Diana Gerding Theater at the Armory, the new home of Portland Center Stage.

Opening this week with tours, a Saturday gala and a block party Oct. 1, the building is the city's first major new cultural facility since the Portland Center for the Performing Arts opened in 1987. The old, brick fortress will house two technically advanced theaters, offices, a cafe and rehearsal space -- 54,000 square feet of new space in all. It will be both the first performance space and first historic renovation in the country to earn the top "platinum" LEED rating (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) from the U.S. Green Building Council.

What's more, Center Stage artistic director Chris Coleman and the building's developer, Bob Gerding, hope the new facility will stand nationally as an important new prototype for what a "theater" can be: not just a performance space but a community center and creative incubator.

It is a quintessential Portland project -- ambition and idealism packaged in something old -- a champagne version of what might be called the "Bottle Bill Era" of Portland architecture.

Look at the last 20 years of the city's major building projects, and you easily could get the idea that Portland is afraid of building anything new. As cities across the country commissioned new libraries, art museums, symphony halls, theaters and even the occasional city hall -- many of them bold new buildings by marquee architects -- Portland has opted for an architectural strategy comparable to thrift-store shopping and resoling old shoes.

Sturdy and refillable as the chunky Coca-Cola bottles of old, many of Portland's buildings have proven well-suited to the cause. The 1913 Multnomah County Library, one of the first open-plan libraries in the country and a proto-Modern "machine for books," was adapted beautifully into the social-and-technological hub that libraries have become today in its 1997 remodel.

The 1895 Portland City Hall was gracefully transformed to meet the needs of a new century -- once the previous century's remodeling was torn out. More recently, though far less successfully, the Portland Art Museum renovated its old art school wing and the next-door 1925 Masonic Temple into new galleries and offices instead of building anew.

Landmarking the average

The recycling of the Armory, however, goes well beyond those obvious urges to preserve classic civic landmarks. It joins a series of what, by the standards of their own times, were basically average, even mundane, buildings that the Bottle Bill architectural aesthetic has transformed into major landmarks.

When the environmental organization Ecotrust decided to build its first headquarters, for instance, it logically might have created a demonstration project for the most advanced green technologies. Instead, it recycled a rundown 1895 railroad warehouse into a homey clubhouse for the city's burgeoning ecological movement.

Even more dramatically, the globally renowned ad agency, Wieden+Kennedy, built a new headquarters -- that has become the city's most internationally celebrated work of architecture in 50 years -- inside a decrepit 1910 paint warehouse that for years had been standing, as engineers like to say, "out of habit."

In many ways, Portland's most beloved Bottle Bill architecture has happened on the cheap. Think of the brothers McMenemy who have refilled everything from old neighborhood movie theaters to a state mental hospital with wildly popular brewpubs. Consider the ReBuilding Center: more than 20,000 square feet of salvaged building parts housed in a shed crowned with a breathtaking clerestory of reused windows, a veritable cathedral to the Bottle Bill ethic. Consider transportation policies put into place in the '70s removing parking requirements from new neighborhood businesses: It helped unleash the recycling of such old Portland streetcar districts as Hawthorne, Fremont and Westmoreland.

Steady and inventive as it may be, the Bottle Bill architectural movement is still only as powerful as the forces that drive all real estate: location, investment and class.

Pity the poor 1907 Stockyard Exchange Building: It was as historically important and a whole lot prettier than the Armory. (Several movies and TV shows were even shot in its perfectly preserved Georgian Revival interior.) But it found itself in Kenton, miles away from any rich patrons and in the way of the Schnitzer empire's industrial expansion on Marine Drive. Pity the poor 1923 Palladian-styled Shriner's Hospital at Northeast 82nd Avenue and Sandy Boulevard, which fell, with city funding, to an affordable housing project.

No sure thing

Sitting pretty in the upwardly mobile Pearl District, the Armory now seems like an obvious candidate for a Bottle Bill-style renovation. But looking back at its 115-year history, it hardly was a sure thing to be either the city's coolest theater or its most ambitious green architectural statement -- or even to be saved at all.

The jaunty, castlelike, almost Disneyesque building sprouted from an unlikely merging of fear and fashion. It was one of many similar fortresses built in American cities to house and train local militias formed to quell local insurrections. Elsewhere, violence raged over bread shortages, the draft and labor conditions. Portland's armory was inspired by a series of early 1880s riots against the Chinese. But as the author of "America's Armories," Robert M. Fogelson, has noted, the common denominator was fear of class warfare - - what came to be known by the popular phrase "the volcano under the city."

Ironically, no shot was ever fired through the First Regiment Armory's many gun slots (though there was a basement shooting range). The building was mostly a place for Oregon's early National Guard to play "fort." Soldiers marched, dined and hobnobbed. In the wilds of an open Western town like Portland, the Armory became a kind of informal finishing school, in the words of the Armory's chief promoter, Judge George H. Williams, for young men to "acquire the habit of correct deportment."

But as Portland's upper class cultivated new training grounds like the Arlington Club and the Masonic Temple, the Armory gradually shifted to being an events center. Local and visiting symphonies and traveling opera singers performed there, but only until the Civic Theatre opened in 1917. After that, the Armory became the place to see dog shows, trade shows, circuses, big-time wrestling and boxing.

It was, in short, cheap space. The National Guard still used and managed building. But the Guard also hated it. Early press clips frequently refer to the interior as "grim." In 1927, the Oregon National Guard's top brass began drumming for a new armory. By 1928, the city's fire marshal was openly calling the Armory a "fire trap." In 1968, the state finally sold the building to its neighbor, Blitz-Weinhard Brewery, who boarded it up and used it for keg storage until 1999 when Gerding/Edlen Development bought the entire five-block

Blitz-Weinhard complex.

Yet even as Gerding/Edlen and GBD Architects turned the four and a half other blocks of the redevelopment into the most fashionable retail, office and residential address in downtown -- the Brewery Blocks -- a new use for the dowdy old Armory evaded them. Architects tested plans for an REI, a fitness center, a double restaurant and even a condo scheme, but the largely windowless building's "grimness" proved unsalable.

Finally, some luck. A consultant studying the city's performance venues suggested that Portland Center Stage move out of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts and that the old Armory might be a good spot to go. Bob Gerding sat on Center Stage's board. Presto, Gerding's big problem became a cultural aspiration.

A tight squeeze

The rest is now history -- though a somewhat tortured one. Fitting the two theaters and other functions -- 54,000 square feet of stuff -- into the 20,000-square-foot Armory required engineering gymnastics and compromise. The new Gerding Theater's 599-seat main stage will feature a shorter proscenium and less fly space for scenery changes than at most top theaters. The lobby space is small enough that performance night intermissions may feel like the New York Stock Exchange floor.

Festooned with interactive displays telling the building's history and the story of Portland's "green development" and a Web site featuring data bases for all the city's arts events accessible only inside, the Armory is striving to be a lot. The original building was built as a sturdy water canteen. Center Stage is filling it with the equivalent of coffee, beer, wine and champagne.

How well the blend will work, only history will tell. But for now the rehabbed First Regiment Armory stands as the grandest example yet of Portland's Bottle Bill tradition of the architectural refill.

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