

**Bob Gerding's built environment**

by Alison Ryan  
10/10/2006

The future shape of Portland, says Bob Gerding, biologist-turned-scientific-businessman-turned-real-estate-guy-turned-developer, depends on how well the city – right now – puts plans to be fulfilled in place.

"What was crucial to our development as a company and our success was the framework that was created by people and government," he says. "And then that was carried on, and was encouraged, by other governmental members. We've reached a point now where we need to do that again. We need to re-imagine the city for the 21st century, and we need to have government leaders, as well as private leaders, accomplishing that, so that people like me in the future can execute."

What he's executed so far, from his first project for Pacific Gas Transmission Co. to his latest, the just-opened Portland Armory, is the reason the Gerding/Edlen Development Co. co-founder will be celebrated tonight. He is the Architecture Foundation of Oregon's 2006 Honored Citizen.

• • •

The role of architects: "My first opportunity to work creatively with architects got me hooked. I could see what they could do...as time passed and we were trying to solve problems, your major go-to people are the architects."

• • •

Gerding's story begins with family. His grandfather had a greenhouse where he grafted roses; he also had a huge piece of land that he'd scraped and saved to buy, in what became Westwood Heights, that he subdivided into the first suburbs of Southwest Portland. The greenhouse offered a partial spark for Gerding's interest in biology; the subdivision insight into development and real estate.

"I never thought I was like him," he says. "But he was very intense, and he was very, oh, I don't know, determined to do whatever he set out to do, and he was very successful in doing that... I was proud of that comparison."

His grandfather died in 1948 at just 61 years old, but he'd made his impression on Gerding.

"There are a lot of things he taught me in the very short time I was around him that had an impact on my later life," he says. "I think that's probably why it seemed easy to move into areas of real estate investment. And that's how he started."

In the late 1970s, Gerding began buying, fixing, then reselling properties, putting sweat equity into projects in the same way his grandfather had. His first major commercial project, Southwest Portland's ADP Plaza, involved stretching the project team's thinking on ways to develop out – and fill up – the 186,000-square-foot building.

But it wasn't until 1993, when Pacific Gas Transmission decided to move its headquarters to Portland, that Gerding's chance arrived to build from the ground up – and to build with innovation. Steve Reynolds, chairman of the board and CEO of PGT, Gerding says, was committed to building an environmentally conscious building. And that meant incorporating elements such as motion-sensor lights, light shelves and building-orientation modeling that are standard now but weren't then.

• • •

The Pacific Gas Transmission headquarters: "A project that was more efficient from an energy usage point of view than any other building in Portland had ever been."

• • •

Gerding first met Mark Edlen on the ADP Plaza project, where Edlen was the broker representing tenant Bank of America. They met again on the PGT headquarters project – Edlen was acting as the owners' representative – and Gerding's first impressions were cemented.

"I found him to be extremely tough and bright, and absolutely just real straight-ahead, kind of high-integrity person," he says. "When he said something, he never wavered from what he said or what he promised."

A year later, Gerding called and asked if Edlen had ever thought about going into development.

"I wasn't looking for a partner. I just really liked Mark," he says. "And we worked well together, and I felt – how can I put this – I felt that whenever we were able to work together, we added up to a lot more than either one of us. He was very capable and I was very capable, but when you put us both together we were a lot more than that."

After the PGT project, the pair was no longer intimidated by complexity. And that, Gerding says, made way for some incredible things.

• • •

The Wieden + Kennedy Building: "It was an amazing process. It took longer than we hoped, and cost more than we had planned, but in the end, it was a project that everyone was ecstatic about. And it was the architecture."

• • •

The word "team" pops out of Gerding's mouth often, especially when he's talking about the strategies and efforts that led to Gerding/Edlen's reputation for highly sustainable buildings.

"Sometimes Mark and I get credit for being gurus or whatever about sustainability," he says. "But it was a team effort. All of this stuff was. And everybody had to buy into it. They had to buy into working hard. Mark often talks about this principle of, we have a team, and we all get into the ditch together, if we get into a ditch, and we all get out of the ditch together. And that's the way we do it. Hopefully we don't get in the ditch. But on every project there's a ditch or two."

Accepting the challenge of finding different and innovative solutions – and executing them well – has led to loyalty. Gerding/Edlen has partnered with the same consultants, architects and contractors often, and, he says, it's hard work that forged those connections.

"We have worked with many of our consultants and contractors for years," he says. "We've given them huge amounts of work, and they, in turn, have given us huge amounts of creative effort."

• • •

The Brewery Blocks: "I consider Wieden + Kennedy being the lynchpin of the Brewery Blocks. We were working on that building, and standing there on those upper floors, and continually looking at this brewery across the street, and smelling the hops and listening to the bottles clink. We were at Wieden + Kennedy for two-and-a-half years, and it was during that time that it became ultimately obvious that this needed to change. If we hadn't done the Wieden + Kennedy building, that would have never have happened."

• • •

The mostly retired Gerding is wrapping up his final projects for Gerding/Edlen. He's been overseeing the theater that bears his name and putting a major restaurant in the last retail space in the Henry. But there's a chance that he'll be involved in the development of a major office building in the Bend/Redmond area, where his son, Erik, an architect-developer, is working on a project with the company. And, Edlen says, he's the type of guy who keeps busy.

"He's kind of a man for all seasons," Edlen says. "Like he took up scuba diving all of a sudden about eight years ago. He's the kind of man who loves to go out and experiment. And that's what we've been doing with our business."

• • •

Gerding Theater at the Armory: "We're trying to create a new model of how a major arts organization interacts with its community and how it relates with its community... It has to do with: What are the major values that the city of Portland has? Sustainability is one of them. Historic preservation is another one. And community, and trying to be cohesive as a community. So we took those values, plus the basic value of the theater and performing arts themselves, and tried to incorporate that into the thinking about how the Armory was built and designed. It's meant as a public gathering place...most theaters, the lights go on at night, and you go through the door and it's 'you got a ticket?' It's a transactional relationship, and you either like it or you don't, and you leave and that's it. We want that building to be alive all the time."

• • •

It's been more than 20 years, more than a few buildings. But in everything Gerding has built, he says, there's the same foundation – and it's not made of wood or concrete.

As Edlen says, "It's not just the Bob Show. It's the Bob and Diana Show. In every partnership there's a partner."

• • •

Family matters: "Most people are wanting to know, well, how'd you do this? How'd you do that? How'd the company get started? What did you do? And one of the things that never gets discussed, I talk about the team, but our families are incredibly important. The families of all the people in this company have been incredibly supportive. My wife Diana and my children, they've had to go through those long periods where you're working unbelievable hours, and you're not available to do things. They've been wonderful support, and they're never given any of the credit."

• • •