

Architecture

Putting Together a Perfect Doomsday Package

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AND now, Portland, Ore. A city in the act of destroying itself. Another chapter in cultural vandalism, banking style.

Alas, poor Portland, we admired its beauty and urbanity, before the parking lot blitz hit and turned it into a bombed-out city. It was strong in natural beauty and turn-of-the-century civilization in the form of those fine classical buildings that came from Boston, the Athens of the East, and added Periclean splendor to the Athens of the West. It had scale, detail, and a setting so breathtakingly lovely that it seemed nothing could disrupt the harmony between nature and man.

Well, man can. The chief disrupter right now is the First National Bank of Oregon. The bank is pulling off a double whammy involving two kinds of destruction—the erection of a monstrous new building and the demolition of a beautiful old one. Three kinds, really, because the fine old one will come down for a parking lot. Four kinds, if you look at what the monstrous new building does to the cultural ecology. A perfect doomsday package.

One wonders if First National has a Vice President in charge of Spoiling, who has been set to figuring out the really wrong way to build a very large new building and the really wrong old building to demolish, with a kind of demonic cleverness.

This is how his reasoning must work. First, you decide to build a skyscraper for immediate status and identity value, making sure that it will do maximum violence to the skyline and setting, its architectural neighbors and the character of the city. If no local architect seems to qualify, go out-of-state, preferably to California, which has a reputation for a kind of genius for environmental malapropism. Take a big, confident firm that will produce something jazzy and schlocky enough to batter all sensibilities.

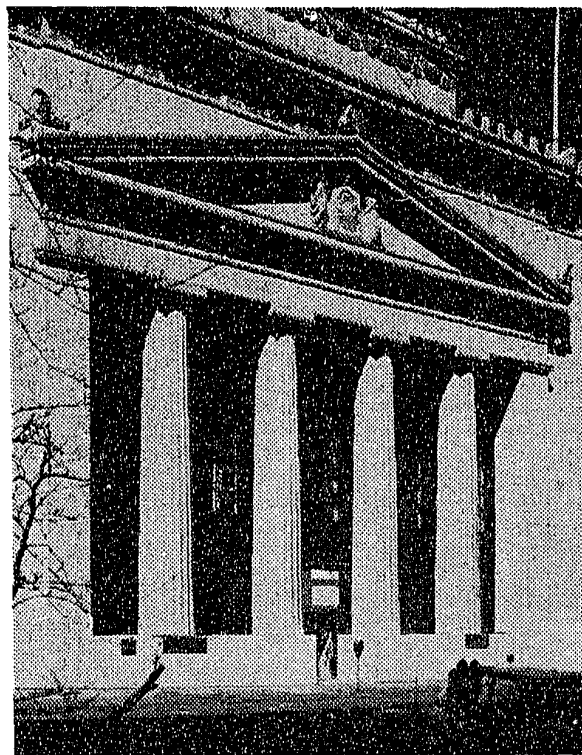
To make sure, build a tower with tailfins flaring out at the bottom. Even Detroit abandoned these some years ago, so the effect will be both *passé* and *outré*. This doesn't have to be very convincing because it's a phony detail anyway, buttressing nothing. Cover it all thinly with marble to give it class. Detail it crudely. Color it corn.

Having created a monument that tacitly advertises values of insensitivity, unsuitability and flashy vulgarity, parlay that into bigger and better destruction. It can be done. Two catastrophes are better than one. Simply decide to tear down the original bank building on another site, which has real quality, and just happens to be, according to some experts, the finest classic-style bank building on the Pacific Coast. Excellence is expendable. Plan to use the site for parking.

Half of the deed is done. The recently completed bank tower, by Charles Luckman and Associates of Los Angeles, now stands between S.W. Third and Fifth and Columbia and Jefferson Streets, on the outer edge of the urban core. Its skyslide gigantism quite thoroughly rapes the adjoining City Hall, a discreet Renaissance structure of considerable classical refinement built by Whidden and Lewis in 1895. It is significant to note that Pietro Belluschi's building for Equitable across the street chose not to destroy City Hall, but to relate to it in scale and details. Such choices are possible, and proper.

The old, parent branch of the First National will be bulldozed shortly. It stands, for the moment, on a 100-by-100-foot lot at S.W. Fifth and Stark Street. Completed in 1916 at a cost of \$400,000, its style is Doric, the material is marble, and there are striking similarities in style and quality with the Lincoln Memorial.

The parallels are not surprising because the design for the Lincoln Memorial, by Henry Bacon, was approved



The First National Bank of Oregon's 1916 building in Portland, which is scheduled to be razed soon
"Quality as remote as the Golden Age of Greece"

in 1913. It was a period of superior classical fallout, led by such men and firms as McKim, Mead and White, Bacon and John Russell Pope. As a small incestuous cultural footnote, there are interesting connections between Portland and Bacon. Whidden, of the City Hall firm, came from Boston, where he had employed Bacon. And the bank architects were a Boston firm, Coolidge and Shattuck.

Both the bank building and the Lincoln Memorial have a rectangular attic surrounded by garland friezes. The bank's window cornices are topped with an intricately carved anthemion moulding and lion masks that are remarkably like the cornice that surrounds the Lincoln Memorial. The carving is sharp and beautiful. Portland will have no future neo-Grecian architecture; that chance, says Portland architect John Yeon, is as remote as the Golden Age of Greece itself.

"Is this bank so poor of purse and spirit," asks Mr.

Yeon not at all rhetorically, "that it will put this building to the wrecking ball merely for the storage of empty cars?"

The bank, turned down once by the Planning Commission on the parking plan, demurs. "We will have to see when the time comes."

The time has come, because a six-months stay created by making the building a temporary landmark is up (just what is a temporary landmark, is it like a semi-virgin?), and the bank is free to demolish. A National Register landmark designation, applied for by the state and usually assured by that action, is pending. Attempts to sell have been unsuccessful. "I'm saddened," says bank president Ralph Voss, "but we simply have no use for it."

Curious. Because the bank has exactly the right use for it—as a bank. It plans to move its branch out of the second floor administrative offices of the old building which the Portland Oregon-

ian has described as a place where "ceilings evade the eye to reach a massive glass skylight above a great hall" and into a nondescript building next door, which it erected in 1961 and now plans to sell, leasing back banking space. I guess you call this hard-nosed. And wrong-headed.

Moreover, it doesn't have to be done this way at all, as another bank in town, the United States National Bank of Oregon, is clearly demonstrating. U.S. National is becoming known as a model urbanist. Its new complex will keep its old building, another of Portland's remarkable temples, intact and in use. Its new branch banks are considered better than average.

In Salem, Ore., U.S. National bought an early cast-iron building, purchased a matching iron front that had been dismantled and stored in Portland, and reassembled the two for its branch in the state capital, at considerable trouble and expense. In Jacksonville, a southern Oregon town of the 1850's, it rehabilitated an old building instead of erecting a new one, an act that gave considerable stimulation to the restoration of the town. None of this is hard-nosed. All of it is public spirited and urbanistically sensitive, and gives the bank an enlightened public image. It is also apparently good business.

The First National's public image is pretty low right now, and getting lower. "I stand before that building and cannot get it into my skull that it is going to be smashed in broad daylight," wrote Mr. Yeon to Governor Thomas L. McCall, "not by a vengeful enemy in time of war, but by our own hand in the calm of peace and plenty merely to reduce taxes and accommodate cars."

That's being hard-nosed, Mr. Yeon. You've got to recognize the enemy. And sometimes, if the public protests, the smashing is done in the evening or on weekends, at double rates. Alas, poor Portland.