

A Look Back at Oregon's Future with *Space, Style and Structure*

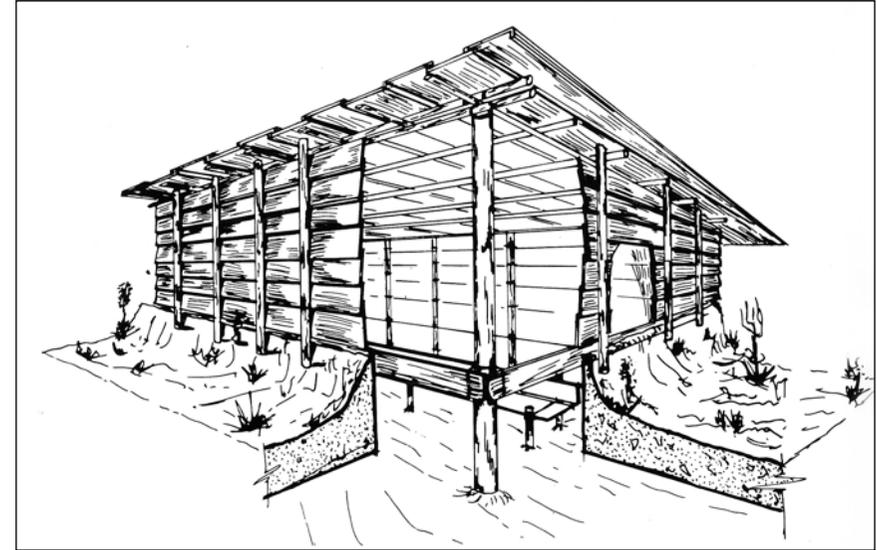
REVIEW ESSAY

by Christine Curran

I THINK A LOT about *Space, Style and Structure*. Not about the words themselves, but about the two-volume study published by the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) in 1974 as a bicentennial commemorative project. Co-edited by the society's Executive Director Thomas Vaughan and architect Virginia Guest Ferriday, its full title is *Space, Style and Structure: Building in Northwest America*. Over one thousand images, many from the OHS collections, are reproduced within its 750 pages, illustrating the development of the built environment in the Pacific Northwest, including British Columbia, from pre-contact to 1975. This book of essays written by thirteen of the foremost practitioners in the field of architecture is as important a source today as it was when it was published. As a work that is fundamentally constructed around the concept that history is a moving window, it stands still in its excellence and ability to educate and inspire anybody interested in Oregon's built environment.

The book defies the usual trajectory of most architectural surveys,

which tend to be narrow in focus and outdated almost as soon as they are completed. *Space, Style and Structure's* enduring relevance stems in part from its extraordinarily extensive survey period. The geographic scope is also ambitious — it spans from the Siskiyou Mountains to Vancouver Island. The regional approach of the scholarship is unique as well. The essays extend across the entire Pacific Northwest and are organized by era, categories, building types, and architects, providing a framework that helps readers recognize patterns of significance. And here is what is brave about the authors of *Space, Style and Structure*: they tackled present experience as well as the past. When they were finished considering the built environment from the perspective that distance provides, they pressed on. They provided contemporary contexts, even examining plans and models for buildings that had not yet been constructed. They took a lot of chances, hoping that their decisions about what to include and what to omit would stand the test of time.



Space, Style and Structure

PUBLISHED IN 1974, *Space, Style and Structure: Building in Northwest America* featured over one thousand images, many of which came from the Oregon Historical Society's photo and manuscript archives. Illustrations document the history of the region from Native peoples and structures to the contemporary post-World War II landscape. This sketch of a Tillamook house of coastal Oregon by Inaky San Martin is based on a three-quarter scale reconstruction at the Oregon Historical Society.

When we commemorate this year the fiftieth anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), we are also commemorating the nascent concepts in Vaughan's mind that would become *Space, Style and Structure*. Both are products of an era when the government, at all levels, first took a comprehensive look at preservation policy. The NHPA helped level the playing field for the built environment in the face of indiscriminate post-war development and the establishment of the interstate highway system. It authorized grants to states so they could establish preservation offices, and it expanded the nation's historic landmark list to include properties of

state and local — not just national — significance, creating the National Register of Historic Places. In Oregon, Gov. Tom McCall was writing his "Oregon Story," establishing a comprehensive statewide planning program that was to prove truly ground-breaking. In fact, the same year *Space, Style and Structure* was published, the newly created Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) adopted its first set of planning goals; Goal 5 addressed the preservation of historic sites and cultural areas.

The years between the conception of *Space, Style and Structure* as an idea and its publication, 1969 to 1974, mirrored the years of the Nixon admin-

istration. The era was marked by the passage of a flurry of environmental laws and the establishment of new agencies, including the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Environmental Protection Agency. While President Lyndon Johnson had signed the National Historic Preservation Act a few years before, Nixon enacted the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which reiterated the call to preserve important historic and cultural sites. Nixon followed that in 1971 with Executive Order 11593, directing federal agencies to set the example by creating an inventory of their properties and listing the appropriate ones in the National Register.

By the time the thirteen authors were engaged in the *Space, Style and Structure* project in the early 1970s, the development of the state's first historic preservation office, the SHPO, was well underway under the leadership of David G. Talbot and Elisabeth Potter, then the state parks superintendent and historian, respectively, for the State Parks and Recreation Division, a branch of the Highway Division of the Oregon Department of Transportation. The Oregon SHPO was authorized by the NHPA to, among other things, administer the National Register program, convene a governor-appointed advisory committee to recommend properties for designation, and create an inventory of historic places.¹ McCall's State Advisory Committee on Historic Preservation met for the first time in 1971. By the end of that year, fourteen properties in Oregon were listed in the National Register, includ-

ing five archaeological sites and six National Historic Landmarks.²

Into this timely collision of leadership, policy, and programming came the publication of *Space, Style and Structure*. It truly was a product of its time. Vaughan first imagined the study in 1969, after witnessing twenty years of dramatic environmental change characterized largely, in his view, by ignorance and thoughtlessness.³ His principal associate in the project was his eventual co-editor, Ferriday. While originally conceived as a regional survey, the depth of content increased gradually, as did the number of project participants. As the scope expanded, so did the team's realization that its work was destined to be a resource of singular value. Vaughan and his colleagues were intentionally building on the momentum of legislative activity and increased awareness to provide a body of work that would have the depth and breadth of information to be truly useful as a future planning tool. Vaughan as much as says so, in the book's introduction: "But now we are experiencing new changes. Hence this book. After 350 years of exploitation, building, destruction and building again like there was no tomorrow, new ideas and tempers have emerged. They are urban as well as rural, and rational in their basic concerns about our magnificent but diminishing national architectural heritage . . . Those of us who have worked in the field of useful preservation and conservation for years are excited by this solid, practical response."⁴

Space, Style and Structure was itself a "solid, practical response"

to the "age of limits" — a term that came to characterize the social and political trends of the late 1960s and 1970s. The authors spread their survey across five temporal divisions and used as connecting threads regional characteristics such as Native American settlement, natural resources, industry, railroad, highway systems, power grids, climate, and building materials. An extraordinary collection of historic and current photographs, maps, and illustrations animates forty-four essays that trace development from Native American longhouses in British Columbia, natatoriums in Idaho, and fence building in eastern Oregon to sewage treatment plants in the Willamette Valley and an aluminum rolling mill in Washington State — encompassing residential, commercial, and industrial buildings, rural landscapes, urban renewal, gardens and parks "from 1840 back 10,000 years, and brashly into the 1970s."⁵ This is *Space, Style and Structure*.

The authors were not preservationists by trade. Certainly, there were several scholars in the group, but by and large, they were working architects, landscape architects, administrators, designers, and planners. The group is a perfect example of the notion I firmly believe in after twenty-five years in the preservation business: everybody, deep down, understands the concept that traces of evidence from the past provide continuity between generations, which, in turn, builds strong communities. We are preserving those traces of evidence whether we realize it or not. We transmit this evidence through genetics, photo-

graph collections, furniture, recipes, money, property — things we pass down, linking and binding families together through time. It is our built environment, however, that provides that link at a macro, or collective, level in a singularly tangible way.

As much as *Space, Style and Structure* was conceived as a dispassionate planning tool, it is unapologetic about its preservation bias. And it offers that bias without resorting to pleading or self-indulgent nostalgia. It lets the historic resources speak for themselves. Flip through either volume and you are in a time machine — no longer "imprisoned in the present."⁶ Today it is tempting, and often necessary, to cast the value of preservation in economic or sustainability terms in order to appeal to the broadest audience. But it remains important to recognize its intrinsic value to the human mind. As Vaughan asks: "Can it be that we have at last begun to see that we are not creatures of time but humans living in time, with deep responsibilities to those who come after us in the adamant golden chain?"⁷ And, I would add, to those who came before us. Politics and economics aside, we all benefit when we understand what makes our societies tick, when we understand other cultures better, when we can identify patterns of behavior that we do or do not want to perpetuate. This is the wisdom that studying the evidence of the past provides.

The evidence I am thinking about is not the kind long relied on by academic historians: documents subject to editing by time or intention — the

way Alexander Hamilton's wife Eliza, after his death, destroyed all the letters she wrote to her husband but retained those he wrote to her.⁸ This kind of circumstantial editing, which happened all the time, reduces our ability to know the whole story, creating gaps in the historical record that are left to future generations to fill with speculation based on the limited, temporally imprisoned perspective of the present. The evidence I am referring to is the kind of unconscious pattern-making our ancestors were engaged in, the impacts of which are intelligible only in retrospect. I am talking about creations such as art, architecture, music, and technology, where tangible, unself-conscious responses to an immediate circumstance filled an emotional or physical requirement. The results — a steam locomotive, a portrait by Vermeer, or an eighteenth-century sonnet — are so clearly products of their time.

So, when we look at a storefront built in 1910, we see elongated windows with transoms, because electric light was not reliable yet. When we see the rambling plans of mid-century houses, we know that central air had been invented and that the placement of rooms was no longer constrained by the need to cluster them around the heating source. When we run our hands over the carved newel posts at Timberline Lodge, we understand why federal investment in time-consuming, labor-intensive hand craftsmanship made complete sense in a public commission during the depth of the Depression. The pages of *Space, Style and Structure* are filled with examples

of this most evocative reflection of the past — the kind that possesses the easy authenticity of the tangible. The kind that stands in perpetual defiance of the impermanence that torments the human condition.

While there seems to be enough space in the world for generations of art and music, the same is not true for the built environment. Its three-dimensional character requires substantial space, and its inherent value renders it vulnerable to the variability of the real estate market. And, let's face it, not everything is important. We have to conserve selectively so the things that matter most can be recognized. When we encounter such unfiltered evidence as the tangible traces of past building trends — the Historic Columbia River Highway, settlement patterns, a Tribal village site — it puts a deep responsibility on us to select thoughtfully. If we are listening, the wisdom we gain by sorting it all out results in increased open-mindedness, empathy, and good decision-making — as individuals, as communities, as a nation.

Thanks to *Space, Style and Structure*, we have contexts to help us selectively conserve the region's built environment, at least through 1975. The National Register of Historic Places, the best tool we have to help us filter the chaff from the wheat, advises against evaluating properties for historic significance younger than forty or fifty years old. Vaughan, Ferriday, and their team tossed that out the window, taking the long view and a stab at speculating on the staying power that places such as Mountain Park or the

Portland General Electric headquarters would have a half century into the future. Perhaps they were inspired by the visionary consideration evidenced in several of the state's early National Register listings. Some were buildings less than forty years' old at the time, including Pietro Belluschi's Equitable Building (1948) and John Yeon's Aubrey Watzek House (1937). This trend continues with the recent listing of Memorial Coliseum (1960) and the Portland Public Services Building (1982), thanks to the significant advantage given to the Pacific Northwest by *Space, Style and*

Structure as we seek to understand "recent past" resources. *Space, Style and Structure* gives us the backstories that justify our arguments and the courage to follow our instincts. It helps us understand that the past is a moving target, and as Vaughan put it in 1975, "the visions we need for our regional future, depend on group planning and assessments sometimes unselfish and necessarily inspired."⁹ Straight talk from the 1970s. And a compelling call for a third volume of *Space, Style and Structure* that penetrates the twenty-first century. Anybody?

NOTES

1. Elisabeth Walton Potter, "A Past For Our Future" (remarks delivered at the Governor's Conference on Historic Preservation, Jacksonville, Ore., October 4, 1997, reprinted January 2012), 6; National Historic Preservation Act, U.S. Code, vol. 54, secs. 300101 et seq. (1966); National Register of Historic Places, State Historic Preservation Office, Salem, Ore., permanent files and online database, 1971–current. The Oregon SHPO remains under the umbrella of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, which became an independent state department in 1990.

2. Sumpter Valley Gold Dredge, Sumpter; Episcopal Church of the Good Samaritan, Corvallis; Fort Astoria Site (NHL), Astoria; Samuel Elmore "Bumble Bee" Cannery (NHL), Astoria (gone); Fort Stevens Military Reservation, Hammond; Pete French Round Barn, Diamond vic.; Jacksonville Historic District (NHL), Jacksonville; Fort Klamath Site, Fort Klamath vic.; Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge (NHL), Klamath Falls vic.;

Fort Rock Cave (NHL), Fort Rock vic.; Capt. John A. Brown House, Portland (gone); Fort Yamhill Site, Polk Co.; Nez Perce Traditional Site (NHL), Joseph; and Fort Dalles Surgeon's Quarters, The Dalles. National Register of Historic Places, permanent files and online database (oregonheritage.org), State Historic Preservation Office, Salem, Ore.

3. Thomas Vaughan, introduction to *Space, Style and Structure*, vol. 1, ed., Thomas Vaughan and Virginia Ferriday (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1974).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, *Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1996), 88.

7. Vaughn, introduction to *Space, Style and Structure*, vol. 1.

8. Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 814.

9. Ibid.