

**The Charles Shipman Payson Building, Portland Museum of Art**  
**Remarks on receiving the 25-year Award from**  
**The Portland Society of Architects**  
**Henry N. Cobb**  
**Portland Museum of Art, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

I am delighted to participate in this celebratory occasion. And what a good idea to combine the Unbuilt Architecture Awards with the Twenty-five Year Award...joining the prospective to the retrospective, so to speak!

Inasmuch as this Award celebrates not the immediate impact but rather the enduring value of a work of architecture, no other recognition could possibly be more gratifying to its architect and sponsoring institution. Yet because at least a quarter-century must elapse between completion of construction and a building's eligibility for this award, it is all-too often the case that neither the architect nor the institutional leaders responsible for the building are still around to enjoy the occasion. I am therefore especially happy not only to be here myself this evening but also to be joined by several of the key figures who brought the Payson Building into being: John Holverson, the innovative and energetic Director whose vision inspired the design in all its aspects; Brock Hornby, whose wise leadership as Board Chair guided the project through its early and most fragile phase; Rosalyn Bernstein, Leonard Nelson and Owen Wells, all dedicated Board members during the period of design and construction; and Anne Pringle, who as an aide to Bob Masterton was the extraordinarily capable full-time manager of the entire design and construction process. It is wonderful to be joined here also some of the key leaders who now have the Portland Museum and this building in their care.

Those of us who took part in the high adventure of the Payson Building have long since reached an age at which we are inclined to look back reflectively on the varied episodes that have punctuated our by-now long lives. Reflecting on *this* episode, I am vividly reminded that a work of architecture inevitably embodies the convergence of histories defining the moment of its conception—those separate narratives that lead up to, intersect and necessarily infect each other in the making of architecture. In this case these include the history of Portland, of the Museum, of my practice, and my own personal history. While I cannot delve very deeply into these narratives here, I do want to give you at least a glimpse of the intersecting strands that made the Payson Building what it is. To this end, I will begin by pointing out that although I did not look closely at Portland until I had reached the age of forty, I have deep ancestral roots here. • In 1801 my father's great-great grandfather Matthew Cobb commissioned Alexander Paris to build the elegant mansion that stood for almost a century on the site now occupied by the Payson Building; • and in 1825 my mother's great grandfather the Reverend Ichabod Nichols built the First Church that still stands on Congress Street at the head of Temple. •

Given my awareness of these ancestral ties together with their related works of architecture, you may well wonder why it took me so long to pay attention to this city. The answer is to be found in my schooling: I am one of a rather small number of architects still practicing—or even living, for that matter—who were trained under the teaching program established and led by Walter Gropius at Harvard from 1937 to 1952. Hence I was the beneficiary or victim, depending on how you look at it, of an ideologically driven pedagogy that, through its mistreatment of history as much as through the methodology of its design studios, profoundly shaped the practice of architecture, especially though not exclusively in North America, during the decades immediately following World War II.

In characterizing the handling of history at Harvard under Gropius as “mistreatment”, I don’t mean to imply that the abuse of history in schools of architecture was at that time unprecedented or even unusual. As a matter of fact, throughout the three and a half centuries since formal professional training was first introduced in France, there has never been a time when history has not been in some way *misused* as an instrument for placing the practice of architecture in the service of a prevailing ideology. But unlike earlier pedagogies, which privileged one historical period or style over another, the pedagogy of the modern movement, as practiced by Gropius, sought to protect the student from contamination by *all* of history, so as to clear the way for what was intended to be an entirely New Architecture, liberated from the tyranny of dead styles, in which art, technology and social purpose would be powerfully joined for the benefit of humanity. This attitude toward history is elegantly summed up in one of Franz Kafka’s most memorable aphorisms:

*The decisive moment in human history, he wrote, is perpetually at hand. Hence those revolutionary movements that declare everything preceding them to be null and void are in the right, for nothing has yet happened.*

- Now, the perfect architectural analogue to this aphorism — an analogue that cast a powerful spell on the imagination of my generation of students — was Le Corbusier’s *Plan Voisin* of 1925, in which he proposed to eradicate the historic center of Paris, sparing only a few monuments, and replace it with an array of cruciform towers set in a vast green space. To understand the wide influence that this *tabula rasa* approach to city building had at mid-century, • we need only notice the extraordinary proposal on the right by one of my own professors at Harvard, Martin Wagner. In response to a call for “the best planning ideas for renewing Boston”, he suggested — I believe the year was 1944 —that the entire downtown be erased and replaced with a single building in the shape of a gigantic question mark, as if to ask, “*why bother to renew it when you can just as well remove it?*” The image on the left shows the Boston of my childhood: a city that was full, self-satisfied, deeply resistant to change—a city wherein the Custom House tower and the State House dome remained as yet unchallenged on the skyline. As a student I was wildly enthusiastic about Professor Wagner’s proposal. It perfectly catered to my frustration and disgust with what I

perceived to be the hopeless backwardness of my hometown. At the same time it nourished my generation's hubristic confidence that we could, we should and we would remake the world. •

Thus armed and indoctrinated, in the spring of 1949 I completed my schooling and entered into practice, harboring on the one hand an intense ambition to build at an urban scale, and on the other a dismissive view of the historical city as an obsolete and largely irrelevant artifact. I cannot take the time here to explain how my attitude toward the city gradually changed over the succeeding two decades, but I must not fail to tell you that a transformative moment, amounting almost to an epiphany, occurred in the fall of 1966 when I was invited to deliver a lecture in a series entitled "Rebuilding Portland", sponsored by none other than the Portland Museum of Art. I opened that talk with the following remarks:

Especially because of the depth of my ancestral roots in Portland, I am ashamed to have to admit that I spent my first full day here just two weeks ago. For this reason, I naturally had no intention of speaking to you this evening about Portland—past, present, or future. I had instead framed in my mind a discussion of two or three of my firm's downtown development projects, hoping that at least a part of what I would say might have some relevance to the future of this city. But in the course of my visit here a fortnight ago, I became fascinated by certain aspects of the urban scene, and before I knew it, I found myself pacing the streets and eagerly browsing in the basement of the Historical Society Library. I fell totally under the spell of what really fascinates me in the realm of city design—the specific situation existing in a particular place at a particular moment in time. In a word, I liked Portland. I liked it so much that I can't resist talking about it, even at the risk of exposing my ignorance, for which I ask your indulgence in advance.

- To a first-time visitor—I continued—the most striking aspect of downtown Portland today is the extent to which it remains untouched by those violent transformations in scale that have overwhelmed many of our older cities during the last quarter-century. By accident of topography and economic circumstance, the fabric of this city's downtown area, reflecting 250 years of continuous growth, has miraculously not been torn asunder by elevated expressways, vast clearance projects, and the super-colossal palaces of twentieth-century commerce.

Thus, on that first visit, began my love affair with Portland—an infatuation that was focused not only in its buildings but even more passionately in its streets, and above all in • Middle Street, the wonderfully sinuous artery that for three centuries so gracefully negotiated the climb from its intersection with Pearl, Silver, Market and Exchange Streets

to the high ground of Congress Street. And my love was rendered all the more intense by my awareness of the threat then posed by the as-yet unexecuted proposal to • widen Spring Street and extend it eastward to break the back of Middle Street. The Spring Street Arterial was a key element of an urban renewal plan authored by Victor Gruen—• a horrendous proposal that, had it been fully realized, would have entirely erased Portland’s historic street network and transformed its downtown into a placeless shopping mall. I was appalled by this plan and spent a good deal of energy in a fruitless effort to halt the widening of Spring Street. • The final episode of that effort occurred in 1970 when, having been invited by the City to offer an alternative the Gruen plan, I accepted the commission with one stipulation: that the Spring Street Arterial would be reconsidered. Unhappily, the City Fathers felt they could not afford to lose their just-obtained commitment from Holiday Inn, which had agreed to build in downtown Portland only on condition that their elegant hostelry would be served by that very same arterial. So my stipulation was rejected, I declined the commission, • the otherwise totally unnecessary Spring Street Arterial was built, and Middle Street—one of the most beautifully shaped urban corridors in North America—was thereby irretrievably disfigured.

Here I must digress for a moment to point out that my Portland epiphany found echoes in the design of one project in particular during the late sixties, • the John Hancock Tower in Boston. A heightened concern for the historical city caused me to rethink the obligation of the skyscraper as citizen • and to envision this huge building as a *contingent* presence that would reaffirm the primacy of Trinity Church as the architectural cynosure of Copley Square. In a happy if unlikely coincidence with this evening’s event, just last month the Hancock Tower—by far the most controversial of all my built works—received the 2011 25-year Award from the American Institute of Architects.

- Returning to this city, throughout the late sixties and early seventies, the Portland Museum of Art was being energized by new leadership, as evidenced by such innovative programs as the lecture series on urban design to which I had contributed. In 1976, responding to the Museum’s exhilarating vitality under its young director John Holverson, Charles Payson offered the gift of seventeen paintings by Winslow Homer; but his gift was conditioned on construction of a new building that would require • expansion of the Museum’s property northward to Congress Square. Thus was created the contextual predicament that so preoccupied me in designing the Payson Building, after my appointment as its architect in the fall of 1978. I later explained the evolution of the design in a series of diagrams with accompanying text, as follows.

- Of the five buildings standing on the Museum’s property when we were awarded this commission, three were to be preserved: the McLellan House (1800), the Charles Quincy Clapp House (1832), and the L. D. M. Sweat Memorial (1911). These architecturally significant buildings, • together with a magnificent Copper Beech tree, were from the

outset recognized as integral and essential assets of the Museum's campus. Indeed, their presence was the single most important factor conditioning our design.

- The Museum property included important frontage on Congress Square that became available after removal of two commercial buildings. The Square then needed to be contained on this side by a street wall commensurate in scale with the dimensions of the space, the heights of neighboring buildings, and the prominence of the location as seen from a considerable distance along Congress and High Streets. Analysis of these factors led us to conclude that the new Museum building should present to Congress Square a building façade measuring approximately 120 feet in length by 60 feet in height.

- Behind the street wall, we needed to establish an organizing discipline within which to plan the Museum's new exhibition galleries. A spatial grid was proposed, made up of two elements: • a 20-foot-by-20-foot-by-11.5-foot parallelepiped defining the smallest desirable unit of gallery space, and • a 20-foot-by-6-foot-by-10-foot parallelepiped defining an interstitial space between each gallery unit. The accretion of these elements horizontally and vertically resulted in a three-dimensional grid defining well-proportioned spaces of appropriate scale and suggesting an intrinsic distinction between circulation spaces (rectangular) and places of repose and contemplation (square).

- Within the discipline established by the spatial grid, we needed to devise a building form that could accommodate the Museum's functional program while also responding appropriately to the diverse conditions of its site. While on its Congress Square face the building needed to assert a unified, large-scale presence, the High and Spring Street sides required a recessive, fragmented form granting primacy to the much smaller historic buildings within the Museum's campus. These objectives were achieved by starting with a four-bay-wide, four-story-high block facing Congress Square, then stepping the building down and back through each unit of the spatial grid as it approached the L. D. M. Sweat Memorial.

- The new building needed to be linked internally to the existing galleries in the L. D. M. Sweat Memorial. This connection was achieved by means of an infill structure that also contains • an octagonal sculpture gallery and an adjoining wing with space for necessary administrative and service functions. The infill building was shaped in such a way as to complete the definition of two outdoor garden spaces within the Museum's campus— • one facing onto High Street and • the other onto Spring Street. These provide a sympathetic landscape setting for buildings that together bear witness to nearly two centuries of architectural history in Portland.

- The very first move in the process I've just outlined, positing a major façade overlooking Congress Square, caused me to rethink the obligation of this regional Museum not just to acknowledge but to celebrate the traditions of its place, and prompted me to envision the

Payson Building as *joining* rather than setting itself apart from those traditions. This was thus an entirely new beginning for me in that it was the first of my built works to pursue a contextually integrative design strategy drawing on local vernacular precedent. • Portland is a city built of brick and granite, a city rich in the kind of unpretentious, serviceable architecture that achieves a certain eloquence through its modesty and directness. But vernacular buildings tend to be background buildings, and the Museum clearly wanted a foreground building. The Payson Building was intended to initiate a kind of cultural revival in Portland, and therefore, although inspired by vernacular precedent, it had to speak in a way that would transcend that precedent. In facing this challenge, I was obliged to think about the cultural meaning that could be carried not only by indigenous materials but by the craft involved in the making and assembling of those materials, so that a work of architecture could both embody and move beyond the traditions from which it sprang. • My effort to achieve this dual goal is seen most prominently in the Congress Square façade, which one critic described as giving evidence of an architect's doodling—thus implying a relaxed casualness that was of course the exact opposite of my actually interminable agonizing over this inescapably rhetorical frontispiece of the Payson Building.

- In the end, the Congress Square façade became the two-dimensional external manifestation of the conceptual schema that defines the spatial structure of the Museum, as experienced sequentially while moving through its galleries. • The admission of daylight through domed clerestories is of course the most important distinguishing feature of the building's interior, but I'd like to remind you also of another feature that brings me back to my deep affection for Portland. John Holverson and I wanted the interior of this regional Museum to affirm its connection to its place not only • by means of material and detail, but also by providing glimpses of the city at various points along the way. • Thus, after passing through the half-domed entry, • entering the Great Hall and moving up to the second floor, • one cannot rise to the third without passing by the arched windows that offer views into Congress Square, after which one mounts • a stairway leading to a glazed landing, with • views into the garden and the harbor beyond. • Thus, just as the Payson Building is seen from the outside as the Museum in the City, • so from the inside the visitor encounters the City in the Museum.

- There is of course much, much more to be said, but I fear that I have over-stretched your patience for my retrospective musings; so I will conclude now by acknowledging with gratitude the action that has provoked this backward glance. I am indeed deeply touched that the Portland Society of Architects has bestowed on the Charles Shipman Payson Building the signal honor of its Twenty-five Year Award. •

Thank you for your attention.