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Pioneer Courthouse Square: drawings, etc.

Willard Kenneth Martin

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Architectural design
Citation

Willard K. Martin
Martin/Soderstrom/Matteson

Classicism and modern urbanism achieve a symmetry in this open-air plaza.

Credits
Architects: Willard K. Martin, Martin/Soderstrom/Matteson, Portland, Or. Doug Macy, Walker Macy Mitchelltree & Erickson, landscape architects and planners; Robert Reynolds, graphic artist; Lee Kelly, sculptor; Terence O'Donnell, historian; Spencer Gill, writer; Willard K. Martin, principal in charge, director of design; Marcus C. Bevans, senior designer and project architect.

Model photographer: Jim Crisman, G. Bruce Forster, Martin/Soderstrom/Matteson.
Client: Portland Development Commission, Portland, Or.

Project: Pioneer Courthouse Square.
Program: The public plaza in the heart of the city is to be designed for a walkway, waiting area for public transportation, and haven from the activity of the business community. It could offer as well an arena for public exhibitions, a small theater, a place for public address, a bandstand, a café, and a small conservatory.

Site: One square block facing the old Pioneer Courthouse in the business district, Portland, Or.

Solution: The architects selected brick as the surface, a material they could carry beyond the actual limits of the square. In extending its surface into traffic lanes and sidewalks, the square likewise extends its refuge and becomes less exclusive. Columns on the south side of the square support colored awnings that shield waiting transit passengers from the damp Portland weather. Beyond this entrance point is a raised terrace and monumental stairway. The north end of this stairway contains a terra-cotta arch which is the entrance to a lower enclosed level. Exhibits, storage area, a small theater, and public facilities could be housed here. The archway itself is an ideal spot for public address.

On the upper level, behind this arch, are two tinted glass pavilions with arbors of climbing roses, and a glass-roofed, terraced pergola with channels of running water. A small amphitheater to the east can be adapted to use as a stage, bandstand, or simple seating area. The north side of the square, an arrival point for transit passengers, is less ordered, with trees sometimes replacing columns and a smaller awning. In all of these instances, the classical references of the square achieve a balance with the more regional, contemporary elements, vital to the modern urban square. All of these different areas and functions frame the central, open space of the square, ideal for larger public events.

Construction materials and methods: Brick paving, terra-cotta-clad columns and arch, fabric awnings, bronze and tinted glass pavilions.

Jury comments
Stein: One thing that it's done, in quite a good manner, on a site that slopes as dramatically as this, is always to keep these street levels in a good relationship with the public space. I think that the device of using a semicircle to reconcile the two elevations here is handled rather nicely. It requires a fairly formal space in recognition of the formality of the courthouse building. I don't think it's an axial space, and I don't think the rest of the square is an axial square.

Giurgola: It is very episodic; I have some doubt about the resulting character.

Bacon: I don't like it; it's a very good example
of the consequences of the current fashionable clichés failing to understand the fundamentals of urban design.

Frasca: It's potentially the most important urban space in Portland. I believe it addresses most of the issues in terms of what that space ought to do. The streets have to go through; transit malls at either end are a fact. The design team has done a very good job of containing it at the edges and still letting people and activity be seen through it. You can argue about the geometry of the elements, but I think those problems are minor.
Book design by Will Martin
Graphic design consultants:
Pete Teel and Charles Potitz
Printing by Metro Graphics
1983
After we won the competition, the scheme was modified with input from the jury and thirteen different agencies.

With 1 year and 3 months of hearings, negotiations, meetings and fund raising difficulties, we were authorized to begin contract documents. Construction is scheduled for completion late this year. (1983)
Finally it was finished. Then we waited...
One of the old Portland Hotel gates will be placed in the street and a terracotta column will be raised. I suggested a 'Louvres' on the square - a 'louvres' brings people and keeps an eye on things.

The "一把椅子" shelter was discarded and a group of people's structure was designed as an outdoor gathering place.
Time was now limited - focus on detail became imperative if competition deadlines were to be met.
First refinements included bronze and glass "Umbrella" shelters.
During a critical design review a chalk and blackboard sketch gave birth to the Grand Crescent Stair and Ceremonial Ramp. An agreement to proceed with this approach was unanimous. Thirty days remained in the competition!

The next morning I received a telephone call from Robert Reynolds, one of the “Bowser Club” critics........ “Will you do me a favor, would you throw it all away, start over and re-design it in thirty minutes? The idea was staggering and brilliant!

Several quick studies eliminated most of the detail and complexity. A final scheme began to emerge...
Instead of objects in space, we became more interested in spaces as objects which could be manipulated by people for flexible use.

Idea for Competition rendering
Pioneer Square 5/27/80  W. K. M.
We discovered that space under the high corners of the sloping site might be recovered, returning the upper level back into an open plaza.
A number of "Conservatory" type of structures were considered. We decided they would not meet budget requirements and occupied too much of the needed open space.

We sought to think of an American Square as a place for people, a downtown "Living Room."
Early Greek villages had an **Agora** or small city square often bordered with a **Stoa** at the edges. The stoa was a covered colonnade to provide protection from the sun and rain, a place for people to gather, sell fish or firewood, and discuss the politics of the time.

A light rail transit system on two sides of Pioneer Square would be built by 1985. There would be a need for structural supports to accommodate the overhead cables for the transit electrical system.

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*The Stoa colonnade was an early use that remains.*
The neighboring buildings on two sides of the space offered a rich fabric of terra cotta with a delightful rhythm of pilasters and fenestration. Old Portland’s cast iron building facades were another possible design influence.

The first impulse was to accept only the European model of plaza or square.

Local prejudice was commonly for another “park”.

An important question: What is an American Square?
In the beginning we experimented with a number of ideas for covered space on the square...
For twenty-nine years the parking lot remained. Many dedicated citizens worked diligently for several years to have it removed and replaced with an open space for the people of Portland. While others strongly lobbied for a covered square with a "conservatory" type of facility that could discourage "undesirables" and generate income, for purposes of maintenance and operation.

In 1980 a national design competition was announced and from a contending field of 162 entrants our team won.

Exhibit
June 4 - July 15
1620 Montgomery
SF-94111
415-788 1952

Dinner with Larry Holpjin before the competition began
4/17/80

To Will Martyn
from his fellow competitor
Jim Keeljun

you or me?
Time passed. The small Episcopal little community began to grow, and sturdy people dreamed they needed a schoolhouse. Benjamin Stark dropped in. He thought they needed a jailhouse more, and indeed, he may have been right, for it was a pretty rough little place. However, the school people went on. In 1856 they picked Engine Hill (the man who bought the land for $2,500 and a pair of boots) $1000 for the land and for $3000 they built a nice little New England-looking schoolhouse.

By 1873 the school was too hot for the town, in spite of all the other building that had been done, and the prospect of this new building that had been started near by the old one, was held in 30 hopes of the not very large town. Not also a high school. More than that, for in those days the boys were examined, some to enter a citizen for example, whose talk was the Orations of Cicero, translated into high Portland English.

So the hotel began its days, the scene of the city. It was more than a hotel, it was a landmark. In generations, it was the center of the town. The town was never famous, but it was the center of the town. When the town was prosperous, the hotel was prosperous. When the hotel was ruined, the town was ruined. Therefore it was the town and the hotel that was always the center of the town.

I remember visiting the hotel in 1944 on my way to join the Air Force. I was nineteen.
The block was originally purchased for twenty-five dollars and a pig of pork.
Visions of a special place for people!
Will Martins Pioneer Square Sketchbook