Lost Urgency: The Luzon Building

By Jennifer Mortensen

This year, Tacoma lost one of its most significant historic structures, the Luzon Building. Designed by prominent Chicago architects John Wellborn Root and Daniel Hudson Burnham, the Luzon had a long, varied history that included decades of neglect, multiple owners, and numerous failed attempts at rehabilitation. In the weeks prior to its demolition, local advocates of historic preservation rallied to save the building, but their solutions came too late, and the building was demolished in September 2009. The tragic example of the Luzon illustrates the need for significant change in public attitude and legislation, but most importantly, cultural priority.

When President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation granting land for the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1864, investors from eastern states foresaw the growth this new connection would bring. Many commercial buildings commissioned in Tacoma during this period were designed by outside firms, including two from the Chicago firm, Burnham and Root. The Luzon’s significance as an early “skyscraper” was primarily in the context of Washington State, but its association with the firm of Burnham and Root was of national significance, especially since relatively few of their buildings survive today.

While the two Tacoma buildings were not as technologically developed as steel-framed buildings becoming common in larger cities, they did represent an advance for the Pacific Northwest. Completed in 1891, the Luzon was a hybrid utilizing traditional load-bearing masonry and timber construction with the introduction of steel in some locations to provide structural support. The Luzon did not have an internal steel “cage” structure, but had thick exterior brick walls with horizontal steel girders resting on the masonry walls (and on internal metal columns) to support the horizontal wood floor joists. Steel was used only on the first three floors, with the upper floors supported by traditional timber beams. Arguably more significant than its structural elements was its advanced style of design. The Luzon was visually suggestive of the clean vertical lines, fenestration style, and restrained ornamentation that would become trademarks of the emerging Chicago School. Its advanced architectural expression demonstrated two key elements: simplification of form and vertical emphasis. The Luzon represented architectural transition and innovation both structurally and visually, and possessed uncommon value to the history of the Pacific Northwest.

Trouble for the Luzon and other buildings along Pacific Avenue began when financial hardship struck Tacoma during the Panic of 1893 and again during the Great Depression in 1929. The professional offices, banks, and retail stores on and around Pacific Avenue either moved to the traditional downtown area of Tacoma or closed. Vacant spaces along Pacific filled with second-hand shops, taverns, and adult entertainment creating a “red-light” district. Intense urban renewal swept the nation after World War II, but because of the area’s unsavory reputation, the buildings along Pacific Avenue either moved to the traditional downtown area of Tacoma or closed. Vacant spaces along Pacific filled with second-hand shops, taverns, and adult entertainment creating a “red-light” district. Intense urban renewal swept the nation after World War II, but because of the area’s unsavory reputation, the buildings along Pacific Avenue remained both intact and neglected. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, the Luzon housed an arcade, and in the 1980s, a Chinese restaurant. After the restaurant closed in 1986, the Luzon remained vacant until its demolition.

Despite the fact that the entire 1300 Pacific Avenue block had been placed on the Washington Heritage Register and National Register of Historic Places in 1979, a subsidiary of the Weyerhaeuser Corporation bought the block in 1985, and convinced the Tacoma City Council to rescind the historic district and allow for demolition. Because if its particular historic sig-
LUZON BUILDING—continued from front cover

Solverson detected a significant new deflection along the exterior of the south wall for vertical circulation, a size that, in Anderson’s opinion, would have been noticed and reported by requiring the private owner to protect the surviving historic landmark in exchange for the decertification of the historic district. An action as simple as requiring a roof replacement would have provided much needed protection from water damage and could have been pivotal to the survival of the building.

Instead of developing the property, Weyerhaeuser made a deal and sold it to Pierce County in 1992. Six years later, Pierce County attempted to sell the property and during the following decade, a parade of developers took interest in the Luzon, but no project ever came to fruition. Most financial backers required pre-leasing of planned office space, and because the Luzon was particularly narrow with low overall square footage, it was difficult to sign competitive rental rates that would allow developers to recoup renovation costs in a reasonable amount of time.

In March 2008, the Luzon sold to Tacoma’s Gintz Group who proposed the building of a shaft on the exterior of the south wall for vertical circulation, providing much needed additional square footage as well as an anchor for structural support. The exterior shaft was a promising solution that would help offset the cost discrepancy between investment versus return. The Luzon project at last seemed viable, but in September 2008 a worldwide financial crisis ensued, preventing Gintz from acquiring the necessary loans. After months of further delays, the building was back on the market by April 2009.

In June 2009, the City of Tacoma received a letter of complaint, from Dan Putnam, CEO of Putnam-Collins Structural Engineers, asserting that the Luzon was a public safety hazard, as well as an “embarrassment” and an “aesthetic blight” on the neighborhood. In response to Putnam’s letter, city engineer Charlie Solverson commissioned a structural analysis from the Northwest-based firm, Swenson Say Fagét. The firm had inspected the Luzon one year earlier, and

The historic Otis elevator. Some pieces of the elevator, including paneling, doors, and fixtures, were salvaged during demolition. Photo courtesy of Michael Sullivan and Artifacts Consulting

Solverson hoped to determine the building’s rate of collapse by comparing the two analyses.

The resulting report, dated July 1, 2009, described increased floor depressions, the breaking of a major girdler beam on the sixth floor, and floor framing falling away from the walls on several floors as significant deterioration that had occurred within the last year. The report called the building a “life safety hazard” in a state of “progressive collapse” and recommended immediate bracing. Interpretations of the report were hotly debated in the following months between those who felt the report was grounds for demolition, and advocates who emphasized that the report concluded the building needed bracing, not demolition. Because so many previous development attempts had failed, Solverson and city manager Eric Anderson were unsupportive of bracing plans with vague development timelines, and sought immediate action.

Through August 2009, the city continued to request plans from Gintz to alleviate the public hazard, but Gintz still could not secure adequate financial backing and was also unable to agree on a selling price with other prospective developers. On September 15, with recommendation from Solverson, Anderson announced to the Tacoma City Council that demolition was the only remaining solution to alleviate the immediate life and safety threat to the public. Seven of the nine council members opposed the decision, but according to Tacoma’s current municipal code, if the building official deems that a structure is an imminent threat to the public (whether historic or not), he can override the City Council and bypass all local landmark laws and regulations to demolish the building at the owner’s expense.

According to Eric Anderson, one of the main reasons the city moved so quickly to demolition was because Solverson detected a significant new deflection along the Commerce Street wall in September. The deflection measured fifteen degrees, a size that, in Anderson’s opinion, would have been noticed and reported by Swenson Say Fagét in July’s report if it had existed. The dramatic movement of the wall in such a short period of time indicated that the building’s rate of collapse was more rapid than the city had originally projected. Michael Sullivan, CEO of Artifacts Consulting, and other local advocates called these findings an exaggeration, maintained that the deflection was not new, and insisted that the building had been leaning for twenty years. Unfortunately, there was no photographic evidence proving or disproving the previous existence of the deflection.

For Tacoma native and prominent architect Jim Merritt, the city’s unwillingness to spend money bracing the building to prevent demolition was a typical example of the city’s poor strategies of urban design and development that he calls “crisis management” and “reactive planning.” According to Merritt, the hesitancy and eventual refusal of the city to take dramatic action and save the Luzon Building was only one of several poor city leadership decisions in recent years and is a symptom of the larger problem: a lack of vision for the city’s future and potential.

The city scheduled the demolition for Saturday, September 26 and when the information became public, citizens launched into last-resort efforts to save the building. One proposal was for the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation to take temporary ownership, which would allow newly interested developer Grace Pleasants time to brace the building and secure financing for her own development plan. Pleasants proposed this idea to Executive Director Jennifer Meisner only three days before the scheduled demolition. Meisner and Field Director Chris Moore both worked tirelessly during the last few days, trying to facilitate communication between Washington Trust board members to see if an executive decision to assume ownership would even be a possibility. Unfortunately, since the Washington Trust is not currently set up as a development entity and because of the building’s condition, the proposition was simply too risky for a non-profit.

Efforts headed by Sullivan, Merritt, Pleasants, and Tacoma Historic Preservation Officer Reuben McKnight, continued well into the night on Friday, trying to find some city or county official who could legally stop the demolition. As the night wore on, it became clear that as private citizens with no direct or vested interest in the property, they had no legal standing. In Merritt’s estimation, if they had gained access to proper legal permissions to halt the demolition, they could have saved the building with the funding and development plans put in place during those last few days. For Merritt, saving the building would have been worth the expense because in his opinion, “as time goes by [the Luzon] is going to be thought of as more historic than even is recognized right now.”

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Preserving Tacoma’s Historic Schools
by Sharon Winters, Board President, Historic Tacoma

Historic Tacoma and Tacoma Public Schools initiated a project last year to preserve and protect Tacoma’s historic schools. The project began last winter with the identification and documentation of pre-1960 schools, half of the school district’s inventory. The effort will hopefully culminate later this year in a group listing of the most architecturally and culturally significant buildings to the Tacoma Register of Historic Places. The project has revealed the importance of identifying shared values and working collaboratively to address challenges.

Last winter an historic resource inventory of 24 schools, dating from 1908 to 1958, was conducted by architectural historian Caroline Swope of Kingstree Studios. The school district funded the inventory to better understand the architectural and cultural significance of its older schools, some of which are slated for rehabilitation with bond levy funds.

The second phase of the project sought to increase awareness of the architectural treasures owned by the district. A 20-page publication, produced in print and .pdf versions, was funded by Historic Tacoma with a grant from the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Washington. The booklet includes archival photos and highlights a selection of significant historic schools, representative architectural styles, development trends, as well as prominent architects, Frederick Heath and Robert B. Price who designed a number of Tacoma schools. “Tacoma’s Historic Schools: An Architectural Primer” is available for download from Historic Tacoma’s website at http://www.historictacoma.net/ht/tacoma-tours/

The final phase of the project is a nomination of the most significant structures to the Tacoma Register. Dr. Swope presented her inventory findings to the Tacoma School Board on May 13, recommending that about a dozen of the inventoried structures be nominated, as a group, to the Tacoma Register of Historic Places.

Each building is an asset to the Tacoma community, but several of the schools are vulnerable. Two schools are vacant, one is due for replacement, and each may face demolition if an appropriate re-use cannot be identified by the school district or the community. Others, such as Washington Elementary and Stewart Middle School, will be rehabilitated and re-used as school structures within the next five to ten years.

The School Board will formally discuss whether to move forward with a group nomination at a July meeting. Tacoma Public Schools has a good track record of building rehabilitation and re-use of structures, exemplified by the Jason Lee Middle School, Lincoln and Stadium High School projects. This record demonstrates a commitment to the re-use of buildings constructed of sustainable materials, the employment of local labor and materials to rehabilitate those structures, and the retention of buildings which represent significant architectural design and serve as neighborhood anchors.

While the project has been underway for almost a year, it is the result of a long collaboration between an Historic Tacoma Board member and the school district’s Director of Planning and Construction, a relationship based on shared values, mutual respect, and a common goal: the adaptive re-use of schools treasured by the community into facilities that meet the learning needs of today’s students.

Oakland Alternative School, built 1912. Photo courtesy of Jim Oliver Photography.

For Anderson, the liability of the building outweighed any historic significance. Anderson believed the only responsible legal choice was to pursue demolition because had no means to justify a delay of demolition to the City Council, to a court, or to a family should an injury or death have occurred as a result of the building’s derelict condition. On the morning of September 26, 2009, the Wm. Dickson Company, commissioned by the City of Tacoma, demolished the Luzon Building at an estimated cost of $600,000.

When reviewing the sordid story, no single decision or mistake can be blamed for the demolition, rather, it was a lack of positive decisions. The building had been needlessly neglected for decades; no one disputed that fact and most lamented it. Sullivan felt the true value of the building was never properly taken into account because in the language of what is commonly known as Tacoma’s “Dangerous Building Ordinance,” there are no exceptions made for historic structures. Speaking of Anderson, Sullivan said, “If that had been a derelict 1970s piece of junk building that had been hit by a truck and was teetering over the street, it would have been exactly the same process . . . He evoked a language that is absolutely no different. Designated historic buildings deserve something different . . . [the city owed] it to the community to make an extraordinary effort because this is an historic building.”

The frustrating history of the Luzon motivates one to ask where the collective community failed. It seems the answer lies not at one end of the spectrum of private owners versus government, but in a combination of citizens and investors giving priority to historic preservation over new construction and local government making acceptable efforts to facilitate the rehabilitation of buildings that represent a collective history. Working together as public servants and private citizens to preserve historic properties should be among the highest of a community’s priorities, rather than something that falls to last-minute efforts weeks, or even days prior to a demolition. All citizens, city officials, developers, and investors alike have a stewardship, and thus a responsibility, to protect the heritage and community historic buildings represent, but urgency in the case of the Luzon came far too late.