By Arthur W. Andersson

CONTEXT *meets* FORM

IN THE WASHINGTON STATE HISTORY MUSEUM

THE BASIS FOR the design of the new Washington State History Museum is the attitude that, in its conception, a piece of architecture can draw from its context. Though the plans for a building such as this evolve from the physical needs of program and budget, the form of the building in this case evolved from both respect for and reinforcement of what was already there. An obvious connection is to the existing Union Station building whose intersecting arches make the base for the dome of this landmark structure. Arches of similar scale and exact proportion form for the museum a series of three bays, cross-vaulted to make a giant covering for exhibits, offices and the lobby. From the beginning we likened this plan and its resultant volume to a large concourse--the train barn next to the existing Union Station.

As cities evolve, buildings of relative levels of importance, from landmark to workaday structures, combine to make a place. A goal for the history museum as we understood it was to simultaneously create a landmark structure, one whose character and presence evoke a lasting image on its own, while respecting the legacy and physical prominence of its neighbor, Union Station.

One Way of making connections is through scale and form, another is with like materials. From the outset our approach to designing the museum focused on improving the reading of Pacific Avenue and the historic warehouse district as an enclave important to Tacoma.

This district has an attitude about itself. The warehouse buildings that fill the blocks are elegant in their restraint. The massing of these structures is an efficient outgrowth of the requirements for manufacturing, storage, and the daily activities of shipping and delivery made necessary by the adjacent railways. The materials for these buildings were no doubt chosen for their durability and strength. Attempts at ornament or whimsy are rare, letting the buildings' simple method of construction speak for itself, stripped of gestures superfluous to the task at hand. There is great beauty in buildings such as these. Together they represent an austere work ethic prominent in the Pacific Northwest and still evident in Tacoma.

Union Station has a more outgoing role to play. It was built in 1911 as a kind of cathedral to transportation for this region and evolved into an important public image within Tacoma. The original plan, with four bays and a central dome, is emblematic of a universal connection with the four quadrants of a compass, therefore the world. Intentional or not, the dome of this building is a constructed testimony to Tacoma's original namesake, now known as Mount Rainier. The shape of the mountain lends added credence to the dome of Union Station, making it still today the emotional center of the city.

The materials used to build the station were in their time most likely the finest available. The use of expensively crafted limestone and marble, not local to the area, represented a faith in the future of Tacoma as a destination, as well as a desire to be accepted by the clientele migrating in more established cities to the east. But there is more to the context of our site than this.

As with other cities across the nation, the advent of the automobile prompted an evolution in the character of Tacoma. A seven-lane interstate highway was constructed directly to the east

Joel Polsky Photography

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of this historic district and, most recently, a federal courthouse has been added to Union Station. The experience of walking through this historic warehouse district is still very much a tactile one. Brick buildings prevail but are held in strong contrast to the high-speed freeways that now sweep past and form a layered and dynamic concrete ravine.

This condition, while an example of what is considered bad in American cities, became a crucial ordering device for the design of the history museum. Simply put, construction above the surface of Pacific Avenue will speak in form and material to the brick world of Union Station and the warehouses, while the levels below Pacific Avenue make a connection to the freeway. The brick volume of the museum is then raised on a concrete plinth, set off the ground on the east side by this protective base.

This distinction is carried through to the inside of the building, where the public spaces, galleries, lobby and administration are within the volume of the brick portion while the service functions--exhibit storage, delivery and mechanical spaces--are within the concrete base. This diagram becomes more complex at the entry of the building, as there is a courtyard carved downward from the level of Pacific Avenue to reveal an amphitheater and concrete ramp to the ground level some 29 feet below.

The layered space is shaped of monolithically poured concrete, a reference to and miniaturization of the highway immediately to the east. The layers are made fragrant with a continuous garden that wraps up alongside the amphitheater and ramps. While these curving shapes speak to the materiality of the freeways, they are perhaps more interestingly a metaphor of the mountainous landscape traversing the state from north to south on a completely different scale. And while the garden adds much to soften this landscape, it is a testimony to Washington's agricultural heritage and of the great rolling landscapes in the eastern part of the state.

FROM the outset, it was important to us to allow the building to be powerful in the honest and unpretentious use of its construction materials. The concrete ribs that form the structural vaults are expressed on the inside of the building, as are the structural concrete walls on the perimeter. A similar demeanor is carried through in the expression of the mechanical and sprinkler systems, allowing for the ductwork to extend vertically in a series of towers to the upper floor galleries where the ducts are exposed and the air is evenly distributed.

Within the volume made by the vaults we were able to combine our efforts in the entrance lobby with the scale those in the exhibit spaces beyond. The height of the space is 50 feet to the apex, tall enough to accommodate two high levels with a mezzanine in between. Though the museum has the strict requirement that no natural light be allowed into the gallery spaces, we made a priority to allow what public spaces there are to have light and the important connection to the outside. The entry space, therefore, is exposed on three sides to the outside, with grandly scaled windows facing Union Station to the north, Pacific Avenue to the west and a layered wall of glass filtering eastern light through the administrative offices.

The design of the lobby then evolved to take advantage of this natural light. Elevators were sited as large, freestanding sentinels--guardians to the exhibits beyond--but perhaps more importantly, they are objects within the space rather than attached to a wall of it. Light bathes their concrete structure, changing perceptions as the day passes. These towers are buildings within the larger building, adding a second more personal scale to the lobby space.

The bookstore is defined by several "miniature buildings" as well. Large bookcases of wood, designed with a small-scale expression of the arched vaults at their top, form a wall that marks the edge of the main stair, which wraps up to the second level exhibits. These bookcases serve to reduce the scale further within the larger volume, and the deeply stained wood makes for the museum a kind of library. Their character is as engaging as that of a model--remote in scale from the grander context, but functional at the scale of a person.

All of these layers of scale and material were conceived, perhaps somewhat subliminally, to refer in built form to the depth of message that a history museum communicates. Our scale games are representative of the journey through time that a visitor will experience at this museum. At the same time, these expressions, from the familiar arches that form the building's exterior to the smallest bookcase inside, are themselves intended to communicate. Our aim is that the images are referential andspecific enough to engender habitation and, through that, ownership.

Arthur W. Andersson, the principal architect for the Washington State History Museum, has done architectural work ranging in scale from gallery exhibitions to master plans, including houses, museums, and academic and religious buildings. He worked in partnership with Charles Moore from 1981 until Moore's death in 1994.