

[COMMONPLACE LECTURES]

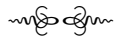
At Liberty

*A Town's Story &
A Theatre's History*



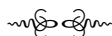
A LECTURE BY
Matthew Stadler

commonplace lectures : connecting ideas and communities



commonplace (L. *locus communis*) : a general theme
or argument applicable to many particular cases;
a common or ordinary topic.

At Liberty: A Town's Story and a Theater's History
by Matthew Stadler. A lecture given at the
Liberty Theater, Astoria, Oregon, February 24, 2006.



THE FIRE BROKE OUT less than a block away, and although it ultimately consumed thirty downtown blocks—the entire heart of the city—if you had been sleeping here that night, here in the Weinhard Astoria Hotel, say, four stories up in a suite with your own bathroom—and all the outward facing rooms in the Weinhard had their own bathrooms; this was a fancy place, a “modern fire-proof hotel”—you would probably not have been bothered at first. Not many were, at first. It was cold out, December 8, 1922, mixed snow and rain falling, and at 2:15 in the morning, when a police captain named Harry Entler heard the alarm, he peered under the pilings that held the downtown up above the tidal flats and saw two separate fires burning under the businesses along Commercial Street, between 11th and 12th.

We’re sitting in what used to be the Weinhard Hotel lobby. I’m close to where the front desk was, facing the main entrance on Duane Street. You could also come in off 12th Street, through what is now The Schooner. The hotel restaurant was a little farther north along 12th, and from there you could have seen the flames sweep east out of the Palace restaurant to swallow the Bank of Commerce, which was catty-corner from the big marquee where you entered tonight.

This was a nice place to be. The beds were sturdy and comfortable. There was dark oak paneling throughout, Belgian carpets, all the furnishings custom built. The Weinhards had made a fortune off beer and real estate, and the Weinhard Astoria was meant to be a showcase, its name a self-conscious echo of the Waldorf Astoria in New York. When construction began, the crew drove piling deep to hit solid ground and

then laid concrete down on top of that. This foundation was rock solid, which, in addition to the fireproof tile and brick exterior, was supposed to make the building last forever.

C. C. Pelton was staying here that night, after a dreary train ride from Portland. He arrived in the evening and at around 9:00, weary of hotel company, took his meal down the street at the Liberty Café, Lucas Frantevich's place on the corner of 12th and Commercial. There were a slew of these affordable cafes downtown, many open late into the night: the Liberty, the Palace, Hadley's, the Olympian. Captain Entler, the policeman who spotted the fire, had his midnight coffee at the Liberty Café, sitting at the counter and chatting with Lucas about Wobblies just before going out on patrol.

Lucas Frantevich had moved his café in 1918, just a few months after the Crystal Theater, a great vaudeville and movie place, which was in the middle of the block, about where Fulio's is now, had displaced him by expanding. The Crystal was fancying up to better showcase movies, which had come and changed everything. Theaters now needed more room for projection booths, an organ (if the owners could afford one), and more seats. Owners of the Crystal put in 350 fancy "opera seats," as well as "the biggest screen on the Oregon coast," and changed its name to the Liberty Theater. Within one hour after the fire started, at 3:15, the then-newly remodeled Liberty Theater, the old Liberty Theater, was a mass of flames.

Rather than dying down, the fire had generated such intense heat that it jumped the fifty-foot wide street and began feeding off itself up and down the block. A peculiarity of Astoria's downtown—the fact that everything was built on beams held on creosoted piling above a partial sand infill—created what one fire chief described as "horizontal chimneys," so that a fire that spread into a building's basement began to generate huge drafts throughout the downtown grid, drawing superheated air through the long tunnels of flammable creosote, which had predictably disastrous results.

It was 3:30, and as the old Liberty Theater burned, the Weinhard hotel manager and his Japanese assistant decided it would be prudent to evacuate the hotel. C. C. Pelton recalled being woken by pounding on his door and then a polite request that he get up and dress to leave immediately. Boy Scouts watched huge spouts of fire blast skyward through manholes up and down Commercial, blocks away from any burning buildings. By then, hundreds of people had woken and come downtown, many of them gawking, but some shuttling merchandise and office records out of their businesses and onto dray carts and into idling trucks.

Pelton left the hotel as the police kicked down doors where sleepers had not awoken. It was 4:00, and the block across the street, where the Elliott now stands, was fully engaged by the fire. Within a half-hour, the Weinhard's windows began to crack and burst and the fire entered, eventually crumbling the bricks from within so that the hotel collapsed even before the nearby E. B. Hughes mortuary, a two-story frame structure that sat on solid ground across Duane, had caught flame.

This history really does not require new writing. Here was the *Portland Telegraph* of December 9, 1922:

By 4 a.m. the flames roared toward the water's edge. They swept and lapped back and forth. There was but little wind at first and the fire swung this way and that, taking in a new block with almost every rush of the flames. The lines of hose were pitiful, helpless. One jeweler dragged his valuable stock from his counters and safes. It was thrown into automobiles and driven to what was supposed to be a place of safety, the building of the Morning Astorian. Three hours later he was again dumping his goods into a motor. Trays of diamonds, cut glass, watches, silverware, all went into a heap in the tonneau of the car, for the roof of the Astorian building was aflame. The newspaper plant went, although thousands of sticks of dynamite

were discharged in an effort to save the structure. ...The brick Wienhard hotel, supposedly fire proof, went like an oil soaked garage when its turn came. Above the embers later rose only one corner of its five-story wall. The white glazed brick of the Elks temple glowed red hot in the inferno and then fell into the ruck. Even the streets burned. ... The streets were actually on viaducts of huge timbers upon which the paving was laid. Attacked from above and gnawed at from below by flames which sucked and roared beneath the viaducts, the asphalt streets themselves caught fire, burned like pitch and fell with the buildings into the glowing acres which had been once the heart of a thriving city.

The fire chief, Charles Foster, had responded to the first call, and he caught the city's new Stutz fire engine "on the fly" as it roared from 17th Street into downtown. Walter Mattila, who was one of Astoria's most impassioned and polemical writers, left us a telling portrait of Foster at this turning point in the history of the city:

Chief Charles E. Foster, who had seen most of Astoria burn early in July 1883 ... had been a firefighter all his life, a volunteer in the great Astoria fire department until he was made chief. This plain, serious and practical man was honored in his profession.

Foster had inherited a terrible legacy of neglect. ... Under pressure of higher and higher insurance rates, Astoria had been bullied into erecting a seawall and partly filling in the streets [in 1915] which had stood on piling. This half measure—filling the street bed within some eight feet of the wooden viaduct of timber capped with blacktop—Foster had warned was creating a fire hazard even greater than in the days when the Columbia's tides lapped up to Exchange Street. He had inherited an out-

of-date city of deteriorating wooden buildings. Over his protests, the city had laid its water mains downtown on wooden blocks between the wooden streets and the sand fills. Over his objections, the city permitted any property owner who made a fuss and knew the right people to knock a hole in the tile fire-wall that fenced in the fill and rose to the bottom of the outer edge of the wooden sidewalks.

Foster has inherited the shell of dying enterprises. Astoria's waterfront had been built up for making money in handling grain, shanghaiing and fleecing its large male population of seamen, fishermen and loggers. There had been no building inspectors. This waterfront empire was dying. The town still retained the name of a wide-open hangout, but the money in crime was gone. So was the big shipping of the seventies and eighties. The cannery empire was past its prime. The Chinese and Hindus employed in the canneries and mills were gone. Foster inherited their combustible shacks.

But the politics of the bygone age and a few of the politicians were still trying to run the show. ... At 2:00 a.m. [December 8, 1922], this old shell over an old, but still a vigorous city, had 20 more minutes to go before its terrifying death pangs.

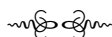
Merchants moving inventory piled things in the street at a "safe" distance, and then, as the fire kept coming, moved what they could further, half by half by half, leaving ever diminishing piles of merchandise like a trail of bread crumbs to be devoured by the flames. Mrs. Diamond stood outside her apartment building, calling for help, and when a football squad came, they tried to salvage what they could from her top floor apartment. "Thank you, boys," she said, "try and get those bundles done up in sheets and our bed from the end room." And soon through the smoke she heard a lusty cheer, "Hooray, Mrs. Diamond, we've got them,"

and there stood the boys, not with her fine bed nor her much-needed clothing, but with a Murphy wall bed, wrenched with great effort from the door frame and two sorry looking rolls of bedding. Rain turned to snow. Gold and silver plated flatware melted and ran in a mass to the ground below the streets. The hill behind downtown was lit by the heaving, garish glow of the fire.

Someone suggested dynamite, and, in a famous rejoinder, Charles Foster said, "No. I'm a fire chief, not a dynamiter." But Astoria did not lack for dynamiters. As the city burned, excited men took explosives from the stores of the city engineer. They drove in jalopies to nearby logging camps to get more. Truckloads—thousands of sticks—of dynamite were piled in buildings in the path of the flames. Self-appointed crews roamed the edges of the fire, prevailing upon owners to let them blow up their buildings. While Foster and the fire fighters pumped river water onto the warehouses and piers, a continuous volley of blasts rocked the landward edges of downtown, mingling with the thunder of exploding gasoline and oil supplies. Crews rushed from one building to the next, hastily negotiating demolitions, even as the impact of the last one was deafening their ears. At 14th and Exchange, a crew arrived at Lovell's auto garage trying to convince Sherman Lovell that his concrete and brick building had to be destroyed. He refused. The garage survived the fire as a key refugee center and Astoria's first post-fire theater: The Blue Mouse.

When dawn came, turning the sky gray and then lighter gray, downtown still burned under a light dusting of snow, but the fight was mostly over. Foster waited for the arrival of a Portland fire crew, and Major White showed up with two rolling kitchens and cots and blankets for 500. Crews continued blowing up buildings well into the afternoon. The streets had all collapsed onto themselves, melted by the fire, and then dropped onto the sands. Twelve-year-old Fred Anderson saw the tidewater running into the streets and thought they looked like great,

fetid, black canals. He wandered along the west edge of the ruins, down to Sanborn's dock where he thought he saw some tinfoil sparkling beneath the pier. When he climbed under to get it—boys used to collect tinfoil, which they kept in balls and sold for money—Anderson found a man hanging by his neck from the beams, recently dead: a logger who was only ever identified as John G. Smith. The city coroner, E. B. Hughes, ruled it a suicide. He said the man had been so frightened by the fire that he went down to the docks, wrapped a rope around his neck, and hanged himself.



BEFORE WE LOOK AT THE MIRACLE that grew from these ruins, I'd like to paint a picture of what was lost. Not of the buildings and the merchandise and the lives (three deaths were attributed to the fire), but of the kind of sociality that existed in Astoria long before the fire and that seemed impossible, or undesirable, after it—a disappeared manner of living that was peculiarly native to the “embryo cities” of the North American west. Astoria, like Portland and Seattle and San Francisco, was a theatrical city, the willful product of make-believe, and, at its start, little more than a plausible story floated by boosters to see who would buy it. The difference between these cities and European cities or even the cities of the east coast of North America, is striking. Cities in the west were the pure products of global trade, self-made emporia on a network of resource extraction and shipping, and they grew and were shaped without the moderating influences other cities knew. Here there was no society, per se, only the constant shuttling of men, the company, and its business. There were hardly nations. The government, when there was government, was an instrument of trade: Britain for the Hudson's Bay Company, America for Astor's American Fur Company. And trade itself was radically transnational. Even the indigenous populations, those few that survived the epidemics, were partners in the great enterprise. In the

case of the Chinook, here at the mouth of the Columbia, they were dominant partners whose savvy and cultural reach dwarfed the capacities of the newly arrived Euro-Americans. Here, in this radically cosmopolitan mix, lubricated by the promiscuity of trade, the institutions that had shaped cities as they grew in Europe and the North American east—things like church, family, professional guilds, the academy—barely existed. When they did arise, they were improvised, lustily, by the unqualified as a kind of show. These were drag queen cities.

Look at where we started. Here is Alexander Ross's description of the first months of settlement on the Lower Columbia written in April 1811:

From the site of the establishment, the eye could wander over a varied and interesting scene. The extensive Sound, with its rocky shores, lay in front; the breakers on the bar, rolling in wild confusion, closed the view on the west; on the east, the country as far as the Sound had a wild and varied aspect; while toward the south, the impervious and magnificent forest darkened the landscape as far as the eye could reach. The place thus selected for the emporium of the west, might challenge the whole continent to produce a spot of equal extent presenting more difficulties to the settler: studded with gigantic trees of almost incredible size, many of them measuring fifty feet in girth, and so close together, and intermingled with huge rocks, as to make it a work of no ordinary labor to level and clear the ground. With this task before us, every man, from the highest to the lowest, was armed with an axe in one hand and a gun in the other; the former for attacking the woods, the latter for defense against the savage hordes. ... It would have made a cynic smile to see this pioneer corps, composed of traders, shopkeepers, voyageurs, and Owyhees, all ignorant alike in this new walk of life, and the most ignorant of all, the leader. Many of

the party had never handled an axe before, and but few of them knew how to use a gun, but necessity, the mother of invention, soon taught us both.

This was a motley collection of self-invented globetrotters who could be soldiers one day, loggers the next, carpenters, fur trappers, cooks, a chorus line, city council, or teachers of the young, depending on what was needed. The promiscuous intermixing of cultures—Hawaiian, Scot, French, Chinook, Methodist—gave birth to new families through what were called “country marriages” (marriages that could only transpire where the city, with all of its civilizing customs and laws, was absent) and shaped a radically cosmopolitan and inventive urbanity, one that could be as violent or hateful as it could be binding and loving. Without the ballast of history or the authority of shaping institutions, Astoria and the other “embryo cities” had to enact themselves through a kind of high-risk, mutually negotiated, social role-playing. People depended on one another for their meanings, their lines, and the coherence of the story they were enacting together.

And so, on a muddy tidal flat at the base of an unstable hill, one thousand miles from nowhere, all of the emblems and tools of urbanity were hastily constructed on piling, and the narrative of the city was set in motion. It was a story of destiny, pivoting on the city's place as either the origin or the terminus. Repeatedly, like a hero's tale invoking return, the story of the new city in the west invoked the Origin and the Terminus. To be one or both was to be the future, the inescapable story that was worth telling, that was worth investing in. How did public life develop in such a place? It was theatrical, fungible, contextual, and giddy. We have to travel a good forty years past Ross's time, past the building of a fort and trade outpost, past the haphazard roller coaster of treaties and corporate mergers that alternately lifted Astoria or left it abandoned, overgrown by blackberries, before we reach the actual founding of the

city. It was not until the 1850s that plats were drawn and a charter made, and not until the 1860s and 1870s that the froth of profit gave rise to decorative things such as newspapers and meeting halls and theaters. A visitor in 1878 described it this way:

Astoria is a queer looking place to persons from the back country. All the business part of the town is built into the harbor on piles, and not a few of the residences have the tide ebbing and flowing under them... The most noticeable thing are the salmon canneries, which make themselves evident as the steamer reaches the wharf. These are long and wide, one story and a half structures, in which all the process of canning salmon ... are to be witnessed by all... There are no buildings in Astoria, public or private, that attract the eye and leave a lingering desire for more close acquaintance.... The Occidental Hotel [is] the cleanest and best hostelry in Oregon. The mercantile business of the town appears to be in the hands of small traders who occupy a small store with a small stock of goods. There are no mammoth establishments... The result is that the business part of town covers more ground than it takes to transact the business of Walla-Walla [at that time, the established center of the region] with one half the business to transact. Should Astoria ever become the head of navigation ... business houses with capital enough to run twenty of her present stores will become necessities.

City life gathered around the main street, 9th, which extended nearly five blocks from the waterfront back to the hill. Everything smelled bad: "The decaying vegetable matter and decomposing sturgeons upon the river banks ... would fill a less healthy atmosphere with a frightful pestilence in less than a fortnight." Pipes were being laid for a

water system. Massive wharves held wheat and fish. Crowds gathered by the docks to watch ships, particularly at night when their lights made a pretty show on the water.

Indoor shows were presented in a building called Liberty Hall, on the northwest corner of 7th and Bond Streets, where McDonald's now stands. The hall was built in 1867 by the Spiritual Society and was also known as the Spiritual Hall. Liisa Penner, whose extensive research into this crucial decade of Astoria gives us a full picture of the self-inventing metropolis, writes of Liberty Hall,

Organizations in the community put on special entertainments there. Traveling troupes leased the building, sometimes for a week or more, and brought their acts to town for a run. Some locals also leased the building over longer periods of time as a venue for regular dances or other entertainments. In later years it was known as the Stutz Theater, and in the 1940s it was in use as a meat market. The building was torn down on February 22, 1956.

Liberty Hall was not a glamorous place, but it was a busy hub for the city. The *Weekly Astorian* (which also emerged in the 1870s) said, in 1877,

A new sight has developed itself in Astoria recently. When you see a man with saw dust on his hat, and a scrawl upon brown paper sticking to the skirts of his nether garment, it is a sign that he has been to the opera. ... As a dancing hall there can be none better, but the Liberty's uncomfortable seats, saw-dust floor, rough unfinished stage, and similar trappings is enough to make Astorians feel ashamed, and a shame it is. This city is large enough and able enough to sustain a respectable opera house, and it is time that measures were set on foot to secure one.

In April of that year, Mr. White, “popular as a scenic artist,” was engaged to paint a “fancy drop curtain” for the Liberty Hall. The *Weekly Astorian* said, “It will be a good investment for the man of business to secure a card on this curtain.”

On many nights there were troupes, some in town for a single night or a few, others resident in the city for a season or longer. A troupe had actors (fourteen made a full troupe, but none of that size was resident here) and a small orchestra or band. The actors, like cogs in a machine, formed a complementary arrangement of parts: a leading man, a leading lady, a juvenile lead (cheeky and attractive to girls and mothers), a coquettish younger lady, a heavy (the villain), and the all-important comedian, usually a limber fellow with slapstick skills, capable of broad, farcical impersonations and able to string together a long night of “Dutchisms.” Everyone had to sing.

Among the many troupes that appeared in Astoria, the most appreciated in the 1870s seems to have been that of John Jack, sometime resident of the city, who later took his troupe on to success in San Francisco. Jack was an inventive entrepreneur, as well as lead actor in his troupe. Price of admission to John Jack’s theater was 75 cents for the parquet seats and 50 cents or one salmon (any size) for the gallery seats. While his troupe does not appear to have had the full complement of fourteen players, it did include a small orchestra, a versatile leading lady (John Jack’s wife, Miss Annie Firmin), and “the most complete Dramatic company outside of San Francisco.” Evening performances at the Liberty Hall began at 8:00 and usually featured a great drama. “Falstaff” was John Jack’s signature role. Annie Firmin played an insouciant Prince Hal, with the full company portraying Falstaff’s coterie at the Boar’s Head Eastchapel. The main event was followed by “choice selections of operatic and character songs by the ever welcome songstress Miss Firmin.” On special evenings, such as July 4, the company would add a tableau—an elaborately staged posing of a famous scene or painting—“Washington

Crossing the Delaware,” being a John Jack specialty (with Jack as the General himself). The evening carried on late into the night with dancing.

There were balls, bazaars, and parades downtown, usually featuring Astoria’s prize-winning volunteer firemen, an athletic crew whose main purpose was competing against rival companies from rival towns in speed races with their equipment. Former presidents spoke from the balcony of the Occidental Hotel. Around this enactment of the city, with its troupes and oratories and opera houses, Astorians also improvised a kind of native culture of the place. It blended the natural riches of the land with the cosmopolitan mix of the population to make a kind of marvelously skewed imitation of real life in real cities elsewhere. A typical entry in the *Weekly Astorian*, August 1873, reads: “Parties are filled out daily in Astoria for a raid on the blackberry patches in this vicinity the past week. The party spoken of as having gone up Gnat creek with the sloop *Ione*, consisted of several ladies and gentlemen, and they returned with heavily laden baskets. Two or three parties returned from Youngs river and Klaskanine Thursday, bringing large quantities of berries and trout. One of these parties enjoyed a moonlight ride to Youngs river falls.”

All-night dances were held at grange halls and homes because at night it was too dark to travel, and a bountiful potluck of food and drink would be laid out, parents dancing late into the night as children slept in piles along benches and at the edges of the dance floor. When morning came, everyone shared a big breakfast and then headed back home.

Especially grand dances took place at Fort Stevens:

On the 21st [December, 1877] at Fort Stevens Company “M” gave one of the most recherché balls of the season. The grand march was led off at 9 o’clock by Captain Thockmorton and lady with twenty couples following, in a room handsomely decorated with evergreens, flags, and the various paraphernalia of war. ...

At a quarter past one o'clock the dancers promenaded to supper. The tables were arranged as only those who know how could arrange them and the edibles were such as would please the pampered palate of the most fastidious epicure. The music was supplied by an excellent orchestra band of Astoria. The festivities terminated at reveille.

The Fort also provided rival teams for sporting games. From July 1875:

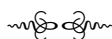
The second match game of baseball between the Excelsior BB Club of Fort Stevens and the Astoria BB Club of Astoria, at the Fort, did not come off. The Astorians made all the arrangements to play that day, advertising an excursion boat, and were ready to go. At a late hour Friday evening word was received from Fort Stevens stating that the Excelsiors would be unable to play on that day. It was too late to notify the public of the postponement, and as a large number of people gathered at the wharf in anticipation of an excursion, it was decided best to go and play a practice game, picking a nine from the excursionists, which was done, the game resulting in favor of the Excelsiors. Next Saturday is the day now for the game, on which day it is proposed to give one of the grandest excursions ever had from Astoria, due notice of which will be given.

Back in town, near the docks, civic life was equally improvisatory:

Last evening, just as the Ajax landed at the Astoria steamship dock from points above, the public school bell was ringing to call a meeting of the voters of the district; a bonfire was lighted on the plaza, and a boy sent out with a dinner bell to whoop and

halloa “Independent mass meeting at the courthouse,” and etc. The risibilities of passengers was heightened by the scene, and a prominent gentleman connected with the press of Pennsylvania, on a fraternal visit to our sanctum inquired: “Have you no brass band here?” On being informed affirmatively he expressed surprise that a boy should be sent out to ring in a crowd, when it could be done so much more elegantly and with such éclat by musicians.

These were not so much wholesale inventions, as local iterations of forms that were known and valued elsewhere. Astorians wanted the comfort of familiar past times even as they were obliged to construct the familiar out of very unique materials, primarily one another—the fact of who they were, where they had come from. There was not sufficient mass culture to substitute for real people or to mask the provocative differences that made the mix. Cultural life followed common recipes, but the ingredients, back then, were entirely local. A few weeks before one Thanksgiving, the *Weekly Astorian* gave us a perfect image of this: “The average boy now dreams of roast turkey, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pies. If he remembers the East, he hopes for a foot of snow on the ground as an accompaniment to his Thanksgiving dinner, but he will most likely paddle his canoe to church, as usual.”



IN 1923, THE CITY'S LEADERSHIP, faced with the task of rebuilding Astoria from the ruins of the fire, had little interest in such fanciful dreams as these. Theirs was a new world, one burned clean by a World War and the rise of mechanically reproduced entertainments. The world had come rushing in. The movies were with us, and our public theaters, our gathering places, would be organized around the logic of their enactment. Mussolini appeared on the editorial page of the *Daily Astorian*, a hero with his boot pressed to the face of “the radical reds.” In his huge

hand he wielded the *fascet*, the ancient Roman symbol of authority that he had taken in naming the political movement he led, the *Fascisti*.

Jeb Carlson, Astoria's chief of police, was obsessed with the "reds," principally the Wobblies, whose posters he feared would "flood the town in the wake of our tragic fire." Fear was general and it could be organized around the kind of reformist agendas that Walter Mattila pointed to in his portrait of Astoria at the time of the fire. This widely popular reformism was a reaction to graft and was fueled by the same social conservatism that had given Oregon prohibition in 1914, four years before the nation, and strongly anti-immigrant politics. In 1922, the state elected a governor who promised to make English-only public school mandatory for all children. This would be a radical departure for so international a city as Astoria. Walter M. Pierce, the winning gubernatorial candidate, did not win Astoria, but something more disturbing happened: the Ku Klux Klan, which had aligned itself statewide with Pierce, took all of Astoria's major offices—mayor and the four new commissioners' seats. This was the leadership that was in place in the wake of the fire.

What did it mean for Astoria to be governed by a full slate of elected Ku Klux Klan officials in 1923? The image is horrifying, the reality somewhat more complex; it's deeply inflected by the social dynamics native to this city. The Astoria KKK was not the lynch mob, so much as it was that mob's bureaucratic cousin, a relentlessly grinding, divisive anti-Catholic, anti-Chinese, anti-Wobbly cronyism. Klan members did not gallop to remote cabins with ropes and torches; they marched in the Regatta parade. Make no mistake: they did terrible damage. Charles Foster, the fire chief for eighteen years—and a Catholic—lost his job, though he won it back in 1927 after the Klan had fallen out of power. For four years, the Klan was accepted. On October 15, 1925, a thirty-five-foot high cross burned in the night on Coxcomb Hill and received little notice in the paper. Klansmen dressed in robes and hoods to deliver food bank checks to Methodist congregations. The Astoria KKK knelt on one knee and

smiled as it gave candies to white children. The Klan even went so far as to translate its propaganda into Finnish in the hopes of enlisting a reformist majority behind their ultimately racist agenda. Astoria's sizable population of church Finns was very active and sick to death of the corruption that kept local police from enforcing the prohibition laws, and this was enough to get Klan rhetoric into Finnish and shape one of the oddest political hybrids American politics has ever known.

The Klansmen who were elected—Mayor O. B. Setters, commissioners Victor Seeberg, A. S. Skyles, Wayne Maunula, and John Arnold—were distinguished more by their inability to effectively wield power than by any kind of fearsomeness or master agenda. They won the election but, despite holding all the cards, lost most of their major battles in the new commission-style government. The Klan lost the 1926 election after their ring-leader, a PR genius named Lem Dever, jumped ship and began marketing himself as the brave slayer of the Oregon KKK, as an ultimate insider who had seen the rot at the core and called “foul.” His self-promotional pamphlet, *Masks Off: Confessions of an Imperial Klansman*, paints the Oregon KKK as inept power-grabbers and credits the Astoria electoral victories entirely to himself: “Intent upon my fantastic dream of ultimate good for the people of Astoria, foolishly imagining that dynamic leadership could change the wrongs in precept and practice, I speedily welded the Astoria Klan into an effective political weapon. All of our nominees were elected.”

Dever's claim might be warranted. The Klan certainly won no elections in Astoria without him. And their major fight, a mayoral-led attempt to slander and remove the city manager they'd appointed, a man named O. A. Kratz who would not hire the inept cronies Setters had slated for city jobs, exposed the Klan leadership as paper tigers. Kratz's bureaucratic indifference and his devotion to business efficiencies floated above this receding tide of divisive politics, and it was his vision of the city that ultimately won out and expressed itself in the shape of the new Astoria.

Kratz made his priorities clear on his first day at work. He declared, the newspaper said, “that in the future the business of the city of Astoria would be conducted on the same basis as if the municipal corporation was a private concern, and said that the efficiency and business economy and judgment exhibited in private enterprises would be brought into municipal affairs.”

The key engine driving Astoria’s new business efficiency would be outside investment, same as before. But the rhetoric of this ambition had taken a 180-degree turn. There was no more talk of the Terminus or Origin: Astoria would instead thrive as an interchangeable node in an endless series, a franchise town whose well being rested in its sameness, its capacity to receive and replicate whatever was sent circulating through larger systems. And these are precisely the forces that gave us the beautiful Liberty Theater that has now been renovated.

John Hamrick, Seattle owner of the Blue Mouse theaters, had reacted to the fire with heartfelt concern. Immediately booking train passage to Astoria on the morning of the 9th, he missed the Seattle departure and hired a taxi to rush to Tacoma in time to catch up with the train there. He was in Astoria by the night of the 9th and at once began issuing ads and announcements of his plans for a great and near future. Hamrick hooked up with Sherman Lovell, the stubborn garage owner who had refused to let his massive two-story building be dynamited, and began installing seats on Lovell’s second floor. A Blue Mouse ad hailed the Lovell Garage as “a building that stood the test” and promised “everything humanly possible will be done to make it comfortable.” By Christmas, only two and a half weeks after the fire, a screen and projection equipment had been installed, and the upper floor of Lovell’s Auto Garage premiered as the Blue Mouse Theater, showing Mary Pickford in *Tess of the Storm Country*.

Meanwhile, the Portland- and Tacoma-based theater chain, Jensen and Von Herberg, began building at 11th and Exchange, where the telephone

switching station is now. By February 1923, they had completed a 600-seat theater, the Liberty Theater. A new pipe organ was installed, and Jensen and Von Herberg brought in manager Ernest March, ticket seller Marie Guthro, and organist Ernest Nordstrom, from Portland's Columbia Theater, another part of their chain. The new Liberty opened with *The Hottentot* to sell-out crowds and hosted the films and vaudeville acts circulating through the thirty-odd Jensen and Von Herberg theaters in the region.

While the building was thought to be "architecturally plain," many admired the tall electric sign affixed to its corner, which read, "Jensen and Von Herberg's Liberty Theater." (It is interesting to note that the old Liberty, the one on Commercial that burned in the fire, was praised for "its artistic lobby which has been finished in pure white with numerous electric lights, mirrors and plate glass, leaving an effect far superior to any theatre of its class in the west." This is a stunningly austere, modernist style for Astoria, circa 1918.) The organ and seats in the new Liberty were valuable enough to be salvaged in the 1925 razing. Several huge ventilators installed in the theater were also salvaged and installed at the then-new Klaskanine Fish Hatchery. This was a decidedly temporary building, its life span less than two years.

By May 1924, a group of Seattle and Portland investors closed a deal on the city block where we now sit. They hired a Portland architectural firm, Bennes and Herzog, to draw up plans for a "super modern structure comprising stores, office rooms, and a theater seating 1,000 persons." This structure was to be "of Italian design" and "different from any structure north of Los Angeles, with an ornamental loggia to run about the entirety of the building." Jensen and Von Herberg signed on to equip and run the theater, pledging a \$60,000 investment, "fitting up the theater in the most elegant style and according to the best business practice." The investors noted that one-third of the property, the third in which this auditorium now sits, had been the site of the Weinhard Astoria Hotel, and its surviving foundation was to be used as the base of the new building.

Bennes & Herzog were capable of fine work (Bennes had designed the 1915 Meagley House in Portland, a National Historic Register property), and their plans for the Liberty certainly met Jensen and Von Herberg's stated goals. The virtues of the plan were not in its originality or invention, but rather in its balance and clarity of form. Rather than grand palaces, Jensen and Von Herberg wanted modest but elegant villas. Herzog, the younger partner who took charge of the new project, sketched a kind of flexible prototype that he was able to develop in three variations: one for the Liberty, a second for Portland's Hollywood Theater, and a third, a year later, for the Baghdad Theater, also in Portland. All of these were in the Jensen and Von Herberg chain.

In the case of the Liberty, Herzog wed Romanesque volumes to a light Italianate detailing, calling it "Venetian." All three theaters were well designed and continue to function and delight. Visitors to the Hollywood and the Liberty will immediately recognize their kinship in narrow lobbies that open onto an upward curving ramp and peek-a-boo views into the main floor seating. The plan suited Astoria as perfectly as it did Jensen and Von Herberg, and by the time opening night came on April 4, 1925, the new Liberty Theater was hailed as an emblem of the city's recovery from the fire.

And it was the perfect emblem. Sensible rather than gaudy, the building harnesses decoration and style to the functional needs of a franchise. When local artists involved suggested Oregon scenes and themes, Jensen and Von Herberg balked, insisting on the Venetian conceit: all thirty-three of their theaters invited patrons through a portal into the exotic, and it would not do to make an exception.

I do not mean to demonize franchise culture. The wonderful Chau-tauqua series run by the publisher of this essay, the Oregon Council for the Humanities, is best described this way—a reproducible series, available to any number of towns. It brings superb work into divergent communities, linking them in a common conversation. Hollywood movies

do this too. But at their worst, franchise economies give us products and values whose origins are unknown and do in a manner that is indifferent to the particularities of place. A franchise system is an endless series whose core values are perpetuation and replication, hostile to anything that slows or halts that process. And so, where Liberty Hall once stood, we now have the McDonald's drive-through. The most perfect expression of franchise culture is money itself, a thing that loses value if it halts or carries, that must part from you and disappear in order to be worth anything, and that must move ceaselessly among interchangeable places, without termination, lest it die, worthless.



THE NEW LIBERTY THEATER needed paintings, and for that Jensen and Von Herberg needed a painter, which is how we find Joseph Knowles. Joseph Knowles entered the national stage boldly in 1913, when, barely in his twenties, Knowles went into the Maine woods to carry out a reality-journalism stunt, living in the woods for two months with nothing but a jockstrap. The stunt was paid for and covered by a failing Boston newspaper, the *Boston American* and became a syndicated, national craze. Knowles sent dispatches scrawled in charcoal on birch bark, floating them out on streams. He wrestled a bear, made clothes from fur, and kept mosquitoes at bay by rubbing wild mint all over his body. After sixty-one days, he came out of the woods and was greeted by a crowd of 100,000 people in the Boston Commons.

Knowles subsequently wrote an autobiography, which sold 30,000 copies and fueled a national tour that brought him more fame and some money. He lost his money investing in a moving picture venture in California and decided to repeat the stunt near Grants Pass, Oregon—this time with a woman, an Eve to his Adam. This second time, the spark did not catch, and Knowles was swiftly pushed out of the headlines by World War I. He married Marian Louise Humphrey in Tacoma and

three years later, in 1917, they moved to Seaview to direct a group of Boy Scouts. They decided to stay.

Knowles and Humphrey built a cabin on public beach land, using only flotsam and driftwood, and began living as bohemians on the Pacific Coast. They entertained famous visitors and shared their lives, for many years, with another woman, an artist named Edith Henry. The actor Edward Everett Horton (the voice of television's *Fractured Fairy Tales*) was a close friend who spent many summers with this unusual household.

Treated in Seaview as a kind of celebrity whose life must be elevated above normal cares, Knowles left a cache of private papers and letters that tell a different story. They document, month by month, meager check by meager check, rejection by rejection, the typical life of a writer, with Knowles improvising the appearance of plenitude and stability, boasting of plans, and haggling over contracts while suffering the painfully casual dismissals of distant editors. "It is well done, but not our type of yarn," *The American Magazine* wrote to him in July 1924, rejecting his story "Mat Moses of Canby, Maine." Knowles's eventual success as a painter belied the overweening care he took with his writing and its promotion, leaving behind sheaves of typescript stories that are still unpublished.

But this doesn't appear to have been a sad life, just a typically frustrating one, enjoyed amidst a bounty of good friends and the ease of living cheap on borrowed land out near the edge of nowhere. Knowles had been getting fairly steady work drawing illustrations for national magazines, plus the periodic publicity of a "Where Are They Now" look at the Wild Man of the Woods (*The New Yorker* published one in the early 1930s; Portland's Stewart Holbrook wrote another about five years later), but never a sizable commission for paintings until 1923 when R. A. Long, the utopian visionary who designed his city of Longview as a kind of civilizing worker's paradise, offered \$5,000 for a set of thirty-six public murals in the lobby of his new Hotel Monticello. Knowles accepted and then, for more than a year, produced nothing.

On a car trip to consult with Long later that summer, Knowles ended up in the headlines when he pulled his car, with two lady passengers, into the path of a moving train that hit them broadside, tossing the car into the ditch, breaking two of Knowles's ribs and giving the lucky ladies only scratches and bruises. Knowles would later use Long's \$5,000 paycheck to buy a new car from famed flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker.

In October of that year, Knowles signed a contract with The Lobby, a small card room and restaurant in Astoria, for six large paintings, two of which he completed and delivered that fall. The Jensen and Von Herberg commission came while Knowles was still procrastinating on the Long murals. In February 1924, they asked Knowles for twelve 5' x 11' linked panoramas of Venice. The *Daily Astorian* reported,

The award of the contract to Mr. Knowles came after 20 artists from all parts of the northwest had submitted sketches and propositions to the theatre owners. The paintings will be of a Venetian landscape. Mr. Knowles was in Astoria today studying the location of the pictures and the interior of the building with a view to taking advantage of all the characteristics of the theatre and the lighting. He will begin work upon the canvasses immediately, although he is as yet undecided whether the work will be done in Astoria or at his studio in Seaview. Mr. Knowles has traveled through Italy and spent considerable time in Venice, so has thorough, first hand knowledge of his subject. His agreement with Jensen and Von Herberg leaves him unhampered to work out his own ideas in entirety.

Knowles was given six weeks to complete the job.

This was a remarkable time in Knowles's life. The sudden bounty suited both his self-image and his hopes, and the circumstance of working and living with Edith Henry, herself a very talented artist, lifted his

spirits considerably. There can be little doubt they worked together, sometimes as teacher and student and sometimes collegially, and their drawings and etchings show both shared subject matter and technique. Henry's paintings tended to be brighter and marked by sharper more definitive brushwork, where Knowles preferred a kind of long, lazier sweep, blending one stroke into another. For six winter weeks, the hard weather pounding against the driftwood boards of the handmade house, Knowles and Henry worked side by side, Knowles certainly on the large paintings for the Liberty, Henry on we can't be sure what. Marian Humphrey, married to Knowles for a decade, was long accustomed to these bouts of work and, as best we know, also welcomed Edith as a housemate. The sign hung by the door of the house read "Welcome stranger, stay awhile," and there was no doubting its sincerity.

Six weeks later, the paintings were complete. The speed of the job, coupled with marked differences in the brushwork and brightness of some of the canvasses points to the possibility that Henry might have helped Knowles meet his deadline. Someone, some excellent playwright, needs to go to the Ilwaco Heritage Museum and read the fascinating archive of Knowles's letters and personal papers, and then write about that amazing late winter, 1924–25, when Knowles and his wife and his friend hunkered down in their handmade house by the edge of the howling sea, burning the fires late into the night, painting Venice for the Liberty Theater, keeping their Longview patron at bay, risking death on the railroad crossings, and generally surviving the intractable problem of being an artist in a culture shaped by bureaucracy and business efficiencies. Here, in the Liberty Theater, is the glorious residue of that time. It is Venice, yes, but like Ulysses in Dublin, Knowles gave us Venice on the Lower Columbia: the scenes blocked out from Canaletto or Francesco Guardi, busy with fishing skiffs from Ilwaco that have been stretched and then altered into gondolas, against an architectural fabric echoing the walls and the building that surrounded the paintings, all beneath dramatic Columbia River skies.

On March 27, Knowles rolled up the twelve canvasses and packed them for the ferryboat trip to Astoria. The city welcomed them in no mean terms. Here is the *Daily Astorian*:

Since the Astoria fire disaster destroyed the valuable collection of canvasses in the Hoefler confectionary, Astoria has been without a public collection of worthy paintings. With the exception of two in the Hotel Astoria and a few scattered elsewhere in the city, creditable oil paintings have been very scarce. This condition will be alleviated to a large degree by the 12 bright mural canvasses which will enhance the interior of the new Liberty theatre. These 12 paintings were brushed by Joe Knowles, Seaview artist, who this morning finished the work of placing them in the window-like wall frames from which they look out across the new theatre. The paintings, each five by 10 feet high, represent Venetian scenes, so linked together that they give the effect of two continuous landscapes, each seen through six windows in the walls of the theatre. The pictures carry out that sense of color values for which Mr. Knowles is widely known and bear in addition careful consideration of architectural detail. They are not bound inflexibly to the conventional "Venetian idea" but possess qualities of their own. Perhaps the most striking feature of the pictures is the artistic way in which they blend with the characteristics of the building. The interior of the theatre is distinctly Romanesque, the basic school of Venetian architecture, and the paintings give the true atmosphere in a most happy degree. It was first planned to paint Oregon scenes for the theatre, but ... one of the owners of the theatre held out for a locale which would harmonize with the character of the structure. How wisely he decided is shown in the admirable adaptability of the pictures to their setting. Workmen are

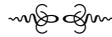
rushing the finishing of the theatre interior under high pressure. Today electricians were engaged in hanging the gigantic wrought iron fixture which will flood the house with light from the center of the vaulted ceiling. This fixture in itself weighs 1,200 pounds. Other men were laying the rich, thick carpets on the floor; still others are screwing down seats and giving the final details to the beautiful house.

Property disputes dogged the trio in the late 1920s. Block 1, North Beach addition, Ilwaco, where they had placed their cabin, was apparently held without any deed. They tried to negotiate a deed for Henry and deal with their failure to pay any taxes, and they went to court in Raymond in 1929.

On September 21, 1936, Edith Henry disappeared, possibly with a spiritualist named Hattie Harmon who had been living in the Seaview home. Knowles did not know where she had gone. She left early in the morning without telling anyone and her last note had a forbiddingly final tone, speaking of "all the beautiful things" Knowles had taught her, and closing "in sadness and tears." A friend in Seattle, Ken Selby, commiserated and hired a detective to search for Henry; her brother and sister-in-law in Portland believed that she was traveling with Harmon and a man called Charles P. Gattis. Harmon, who had taken up residence in the Seaview home months before the disappearance, had conducted séances with Henry and tried to convince her that Knowles would die in October of that year and the house and art practice would become hers. Henry also got a mysterious case of food poisoning when Hattie Harmon was attending to her health. Knowles thought Harmon was plotting to take over the house and have it for her own. When Knowles had a gall bladder attack, Harmon offered him magnetic treatments, which he refused, and soon, Henry and Harmon disappeared forever.

Joseph Knowles died in 1942, having never seen Edith Henry again.

Among his papers there is this: "If life means anything at all it means freedom of thought and art and health—comfort—and happiness."



IN THE RENOVATED LIBERTY THEATER, with the lights up one sees the record of Joseph Knowles's Venice, but with the lights out—which is to say, during its seventy-odd-year history as a movie theater—this room was a portal into timeless, unhinged worlds, the shocking dissolution of the physical space around us, which was lost in those brightly flashing bursts of light, giving way to the cinema. Here is a recollection of uncertain date:

Mr. Harley introduced the program, comparing us favorably to Des Moines. "Turn your eyes away from the East," he sermonized. "For you are the City of the Future." A chord from the organ lent portent and the house lights went out. I could see nothing in the close heat. Light burst upon the screen, silhouetting rows of hatless men and women. A multitude came into focus, poised beside the river, the dais above them. Herky-jerky motions of the Mayor, his face big as a house, chopping air. In the crowd, beside a panorama of boats, I glimpsed Jedah in Kinney's rented chair, a smear of gray; then the Mayor and Mr. Hill, and then the first pile driven; a drumbeat marked the blows of the mechanical hammer. The picture split and tilted and was pulled away. The house lights brightened. Slavoj jeered and there was loud whistling. We began shouting but were drowned out by merriment. In front, beside Kearney and Mr. Harley, I saw Eric and his dad, whose leg was bandaged and had a splint. The black and white field burst open again before us.

A Chinook was hoisted on block tackle above the docks. Crowds in our downtown watched fireworks: brilliant flowers

that blossomed and died in the night, gems among black stones. A bird struggled in a gill net, its black wings scratching the bright screen. Hollowed reeds bent in the wind of Young's River bay. Trolley cars circled at the Bond street roundhouse. New piers and buildings pressed into rows on the screen like fish in a can. Picture followed picture like a series of stitches so the city became flat and patterned like fabric, and my attention was caught in its progress until my neck became sore.

I closed my eyes, and then turned. Light and shadow burst like bombs across the faces behind me. Facing front I had felt narcotized, amused, but, when I looked behind, a hundred mouths twitched and grimaced in chorus, jerking and dodging the light. The pace of flash and shadow never flagged, yet no one shied away. Their eyes were those of animals caught in headlamps, yet from their mouths came waves of smiles and laughter.

Shows began at 1:30 and were continuous. You stopped outside at the newsstand, where the Rusty Cup is now, to buy candy and paid twenty-five cents admission; kids who could sit in the balcony, and after the vaudeville act was done—becoming less and less beside the ascending glory of the cinema—and the lights went down, some boys hurried silently to the curtained exits and let their chums in through quickly opened doors. The Wurlitzer organ was a marvel, shipped in pieces from the Portland firm that did all of Jensen and Von Herberg's big organs. It rattled and shook when the low notes came. Cathedral chimes rang throughout the room. The Liberty witnessed the disappearance of vaudeville and the live musician, was host to the rise of movies, and gave an elegant, comfortable setting where the city could watch the rise of mass culture.

The new Liberty opened on April 4, 1925. Through the rest of the 1920s, sell-out crowds enjoyed the vaudeville and a moving picture program featuring Harold Lloyd in *Hot Water*, radio station KFJL put on its

long-running local talent show, the Clatsop County fiddlers filled the stage, Hortense Stacey won a contest to send the most beautiful girl in Astoria to Hollywood and her “screen test” was shown in this very room, George Jessel appeared in the first talking film followed by Al Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer*, the Jensen and Von Herberg theater chain was sold to North American Theaters Corp, making it the nation’s biggest. Then the 1930s, hi-fi Vitagraph technology came to the Liberty and the *Wizard of Oz* dazzled audiences with its brilliant wall of cinematic colors. Jack Holt’s movie *Roaring Timber*, filmed in Clatsop County, played, and the famous movie dog, Lone Eagle, appeared live. Then the Fox theater chain absorbed the Liberty and later bought its town rival, the Columbian, restricting it to live shows to insure bigger crowds at the Liberty. In the 1940s, renovations reduced the stage area and gave the room a bigger sound system, and heavyweight legend Jack Dempsey appeared pitching War Bonds, before the last days of live theater gave way to movies only. The 1950s brought the arrival of Cinemascope and gradually thinning crowds with the advent of television. As the city itself suffered a long slow decline into the 1980s and ’90s, losing population and many of its long-standing industries, so the Liberty seemed to drift into a kind of miasma of diminishing crowds and dulled excitement, lifting and falling on the ambient waves of interest generated in the national press by this or that great new film release—a bonanza in 1967 with *The Graduate*, a doldrums the next year with *Planet of the Apes*—until finally, in the late ’90s, news came that the theater owner saw no profitable way forward except dividing the room into three separate theaters, a multiplex without the cost of teardown or rebuilding. It was a common solution for an all-too-commonly perceived problem. The logic of business and the management of civic affairs as a kind of private enterprise had reached its inevitable conclusion.

When the new triplex was announced, architectural historian and preservationist John Goodenberger, acting on no authority but his own,

went to the Liberty to involve himself in the work being undertaken. He decided to “give art history lectures,” working with the manager and a craftsman assigned to the task of renovation. With their good graces and Goodenberger’s knowledge of the historical qualities of the building, the insertion of the triplex was carried out with no irreversible damage to the structure; the great canvas chandelier (which the owner had asked the workers to vacuum) was left alone, and the paintings went untouched.

The movies rambled on, now in triplicate, but the mathematics of the business did not get any easier. The owner of the theater, whose slim profits depended entirely on the flintiness of his investment in the building, began to see the advantages of selling. We are sitting now in the beautiful result of that decision to sell and the hard labors of scores of Astorians to take this resource and make it what it is today. That is another story, a very happy one.

There were golden moments and treasures throughout those long decades, in the privacy of the dark or the howling laughter of a crowd brought together by the stage antics of the India Rubber Man, but the true golden age of this theater, and this room, lay ahead. How wonderful to have a movie house that is this beautiful, but how much better to bring it to light and fill it with open eyes looking at one another.

You have all heard about the years of work that followed and culminated with the reopening of this room to public meetings, concerts, plays, and all of the civic life that began in Astoria at the old Liberty Hall. Many of you have lived those years of work. I am among the beneficiaries, a half-dozen times as audience to great music and now as a person who gets to stand here and speak.

This very special room is poised to recommence a special history that long preceded it. In many ways, the Astoria that the new Liberty is being born into resembles the city that enjoyed the first Liberty—Liberty Hall. Families drive out to line dance at the Netel Grange, staying late, though now they motor back to their separate homes; fisher poets come

in off the boats to fill the taverns and stages with their self-invented verse; the city thinks through the organ of its community radio, talking and listening to a set of concerns and arguments that are rooted here in the lives and hopes of neighbors, Lower Columbia musicians bring punk groups from Seaside or Long Beach or Astoria and set them up in the Eagle's Hall, Horse Flesh dons its knitted red costumes and plays a rotary grinder against the face of an electric guitar in a basement house party on Irving Street, the Sunday market sells the produce of neighboring farmers to the cooks downtown. This is the same do-it-yourself culture, the same local improvisation of broadly circulating forms that marked the nineteenth century here. Neighbors enact the city with minimal authority and few means, but with a great vibrant gusto for life and what it means to be living here now.

I have taken us back to the civic life and popular culture of the city's earliest decades because I believe our particular history is a unique resource. Obligated to conjure our own meanings from simply the ingredients available near at hand, the new cities of the west became skilled at exactly the sort of cultural self-invention that is now emerging as a vital solvent to the muffling totalities of mass culture. We've been doing this a long time. Ironically, it is those western cities that failed to become "the next New York," that failed to replicate the lives lived elsewhere, that failed to grow large enough, which are now proving most resourceful at enacting this long-standing theatrical urbanity: Portland more so than Seattle, Astoria more so than Portland.

And all of this transpires under the increasingly monolithic shadow of distant faceless enterprises that—as in the nineteenth-century era of city building—carry out their agendas free from the constraints of nations, locality, or sometimes even laws. The story of fire returns and returns. In the face of such large and cumbersome forces, whether the Hudson Bay Company or LNG, one can at least set the stage for the enactment of a nimble, local, contextual urbanity. This theater offers us that.

In my hotel room at the Elliott, there's a photograph of a woman standing on Commercial Street waiting for a streetcar. It's all horses and buggies, and that woman is decked out in modest Victorian. Look closely and you'll see an electrical wand on the streetcar, plus the painted #5, which puts us squarely into the 1900s. We're looking west down Commercial, at the corner of 14th. Westbound cars took that right turn, went north one block to Bond (now it's Marine Drive) and then down to 6th. They came back east through downtown on Commercial. The Liberty will someday be built one block up on the left side. The street is marked by telegraph poles, three or four to a block, marching like soldiers down the street, plus, in the middle, that great faceless streetcar that's plowing its way along steel tracks in the mud. It's going probably a half-mile an hour as this poor woman stares at it, wondering how in the hell she's supposed to board such a thing with any of the grace or urbanity that her lovely hat and her umbrella and her shopping dress seem to require. She's gone downtown to shop—the whole morning was probably spent preparing for it—only to find herself now, poised in the mud, faced with this great, graceless streetcar.

It's a crowded photograph. The buildings press in. Architectural bric-a-brac shadows the planked sidewalks: something Tudor with a balcony, a Moorish dome, and, opposite them, a great Classical façade made entirely of wood, on top of which stands a huge, decorative elephant, cutout in silhouette, lumbering across the crown of a grocery. The buildings are packed together, shallow and temporary, like stage sets. This woman doesn't know where she is. Is this a city? It's all so fake, so inadequate. The streetcar is about the only solid thing in sight, the only thing that could kill you, and, if it ever arrives, she's going to have to pick her way through the mud to climb on board.

Amidst the fakery, this wishful try at a downtown, a boy stands on the left side of the photo, back to a telegraph pole, staring at us. He's on the plank sidewalk, full of ease and indifference. It's bracing. While that

woman is poised above the mud wondering where she's ended up, this confident boy knows exactly where he is: he is in a photograph. Hey look, there's the camera. No big deal. He was probably born here. It's clear that in the moment of that woman's irresolvable puzzlement over the problem of the city, this ungainly downtown, what concerns him is the pleasure of being photographed.

This kind of naïve ease might be the luxury of youth, but I believe it is also native to the cities of the North American West. The theater of city building, the great dramas of urban life have here played out on a stage that lacks any authority, any backdrop of history that might mask our origins in make-believe. In London or Paris, even in New York, history and literature have conspired to convince us that the city is an eternal, natural organism, a habitat into which men and women are born. The great dramas of Dickens or Zola begin with the fact of the city. Life proceeds from there. The woman looks toward the streetcar wishing she were in a novel by Dickens. But that boy has his mind on himself and on his place in Astoria. Here in the cities of the North American west, we are in a novel of our own making. The restored Liberty Theater gives us a wonderful stage on which to enact it.

MATTHEW STADLER

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