

Architecture of the Oregon State Capitol

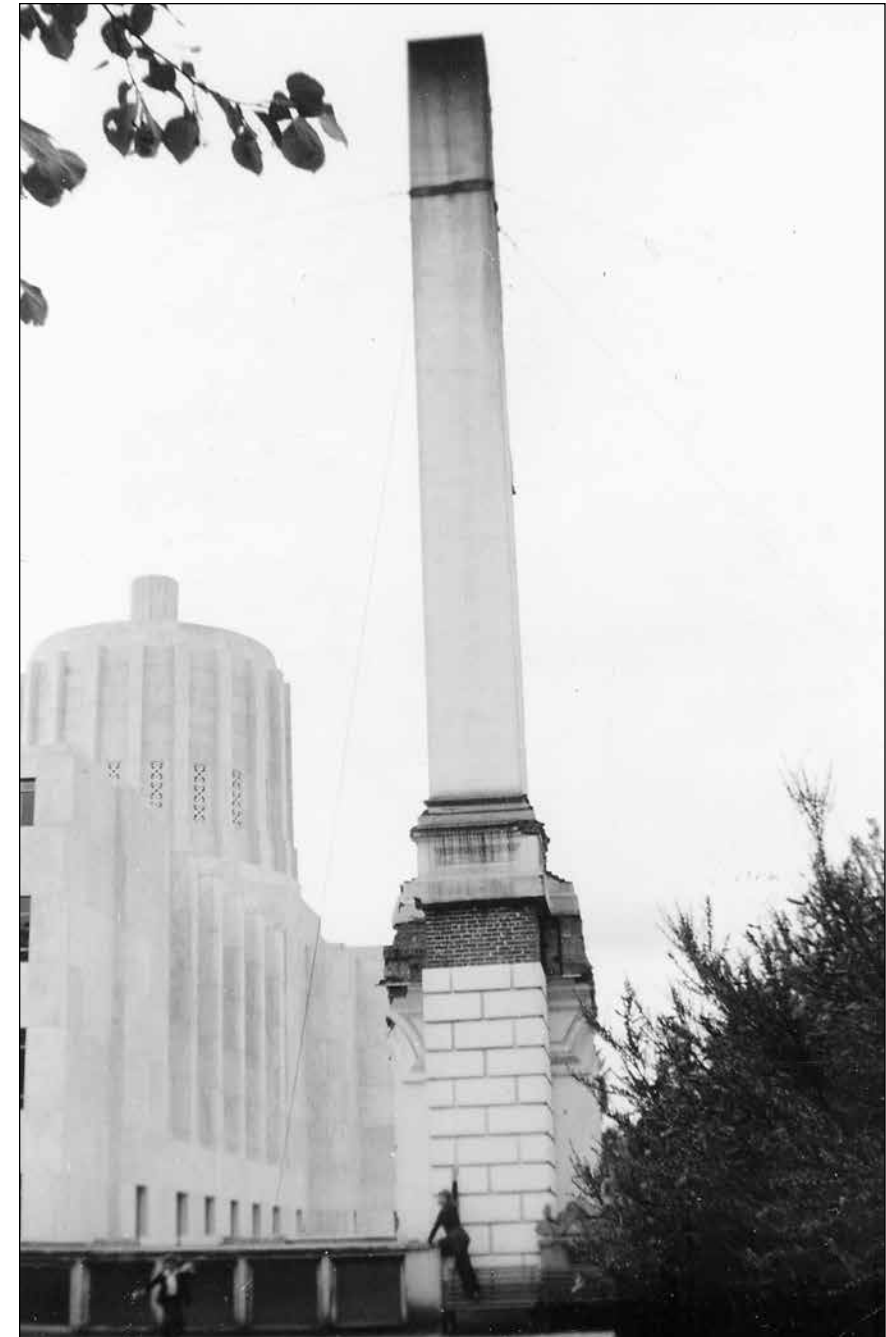
by William F. Willingham

OREGON'S twentieth-century state Capitol stands as a landmark of modernist design based on the principles of Classical architecture. When completed in 1938 during the Great Depression, the new, stripped Classical building represented a bold modernist statement. Its contrast with the dated historicism inherent in the traditional Classical design of the typical nineteenth-century American state capitol could not have been more striking. The commitment to achieving lasting quality and the great care taken by those responsible for the planning, design, and construction of the Oregon State Capitol have assured that it continues to be a fully functional and admired example of its kind.

American statehouses have been prominent political and architectural symbols of republican government and important sources of state pride and identity for over 150 years. When an intense and fast-moving fire engulfed and destroyed Oregon's nineteenth-century Capitol on April 25, 1935, the state government moved

quickly to begin the process of rebuilding. Controversy, however, arose between the governor and legislature over the financing, location, and design of the replacement building. Once the politicians resolved the matters of location and finance, the legislature turned over the issues of design and construction to a nine-person citizens committee. The committee held a nationwide architectural competition, which received 123 entries from architects hungry for work in the midst of the Depression. More than twenty Oregon firms entered the double-blind competition. Proposals spanned the popular design spectrum, from traditional Classical Revival to Modernism.

The winning design by New York architect Francis Keally, in association with the firm of Trowbridge and Livingston, is best described as stripped Classical, although Keally more fancifully referred to it as "Grecian Moderne." Regardless of precise terminology employed, the new design for Oregon's Capitol stood in strik-



The smokestack from the heating plant of Oregon's second Capitol stands near the new building. As an economy measure, planners hoped to reuse the heating plant of the old Capitol that had not been harmed when the building burned. When that proved to be impractical, the remnant smokestack was removed.

OHS digital no. ba016231

ing contrast to its predecessor. Constructed in 1873 in a traditional Classical style shaped by Italian Renaissance design principles, the old Capitol had a cruciform plan with a central section and three-story wings extending on either side. A large copper dome, added in 1893, surmounted the center portion, which had an imposing, full-height entry portico with Corinthian columns. The building's main entry faced west toward downtown Salem. Oregon's nineteenth-century statehouse design was very much in keeping with the typical state capitol of the period, which generally shared characteristics such as a prominent building site, parklike setting, monumental size, cruciform ground plan, dome and rotunda, and temple front.

Keally stripped the traditional state capitol design to its bare essentials, including removing its dome. He designed a building composed of three symmetrical, unadorned blocks or volumes constructed of reinforced concrete and steel and clad in white Vermont marble, the whole sitting on a granite base. The east and west wings, housing the Senate and House chambers, incorporate 17-foot-high steel, multipaned casement windows, which are separated by vertical projections or ribs that simulate pilasters. The central portion of the building, which houses a rotunda, projects slightly forward from the wings and is surmounted by a round, flat-topped lantern ringed by vertical projections similar to those on the front elevations of the wings. The lantern rises 43 feet above the roof on a series of setback pedestals. Atop the

lantern, another pedestal extends 18 feet, supplying the base for a gilded, 23-foot-high bronze statue, known as the *Oregon Pioneer*. The distance from the ground to the top of the stature measures 168 feet. The Capitol extends 394 feet in length and 162 feet in width, including the slight projection of the central portion of the building on the south elevation. To make the best use of the site and planned future development, Keally turned the Capitol's front to face north.

Granite pavilions at the front of the central section of the building lead visitors to the main entrance by two flights of low steps. Overhead, the entrance is a carved bas-relief of an eagle with outspread wings over a sunburst below the inscription "State of Oregon." The glass and bronze doors have panels with cast-bronze bas-reliefs of various animals and the three-masted schooner *Columbia Rediviva*. More art symbolic of Oregon history flanks the front entrance of the Capitol. At the base of the pavilion steps sit two marble slabs; on the west is a carving of a covered wagon and Lewis and Clark led by Sacagawea, while on the east is a map of the Oregon Trail. The art program for the Capitol was carried out by sculptors Ulric Ellerhusen and Leo Friedlander and artists Frank Schwarz and Barry Faulkner.

Taken as a whole, the symmetrical yet varied planes of the front elevation of the building suggest the influence of Beaux-Arts Classicism, while the overall lack of ornamentation and the verticality emphasized by the surface

projections on the wings and lantern reflect the application of the modern idiom known as Art Deco. The simple elegance of the Oregon Capitol succeeds as an architectural statement of its type because, as architectural historians Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale note, "it embodies the full Capitol character, though pared down to the most economical simplicity without the use of cheap expedients."*

The streamlined and moderne interior of the Capitol is notable for its extensive use of three kinds of marble and various types of Oregon and imported woods. The rotunda, 55 feet in diameter, extends 106 feet to the top of the interior dome. The dome is covered with 33 gold-leaf stars, representing Oregon's place as the thirty-third state to enter the union. Embedded in the center of the floor at the base of the rotunda is a large, bronze replica of the Oregon state seal. In the rotunda and throughout the interior of the Capitol are murals of Depression-era art depicting events important in Oregon history. As a product of its time, however, the Capitol's artwork focuses mainly on white settlement and development of the Oregon Country, slighting the histories of Native Americans, other non-whites, and women. The 25-foot-wide marble stairs lead to the second floor, where the wings contain the Senate and House chambers. Keally's design

* Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale, *Temples of Democracy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 292.

placed the legislative chambers on the building's outer walls in order for them to receive natural light. He located the governor's suite in the area between the legislative chambers. Overall, the building has an open, spacious feel with excellent circulation patterns.

When it became necessary to expand the Capitol in 1975 to meet the need for more legislative committee and office space, the building's original design and site lent to the enlargement. The new addition of almost 190,000 square feet at the south elevation of the building kept intact the integrity of the Capitol's design by arranging the new space in compatibly styled, block-like wings of appropriate scale. The addition, clad in matching Vermont marble, is set back from the original building and thus appears subordinate and distinguishable from it. The Portland architectural firm of Wolf, Zimmer, Gunsal, Fransca designed the addition.

Keally's Capitol generally was well-received by the public at its completion. Over time, it became the focal point for the subsequent mall and state office complex that stretches to the north. The Capitol's carefully chosen and beautifully executed artwork and decoration celebrate the state's history and leading figures. Today, the Capitol continues to express the authority and presence of state government while serving as a notable landmark for Oregonians and visitors alike. Marking the transition between the traditional and modern in statehouse design, the Oregon State Capitol has stood the test of time.



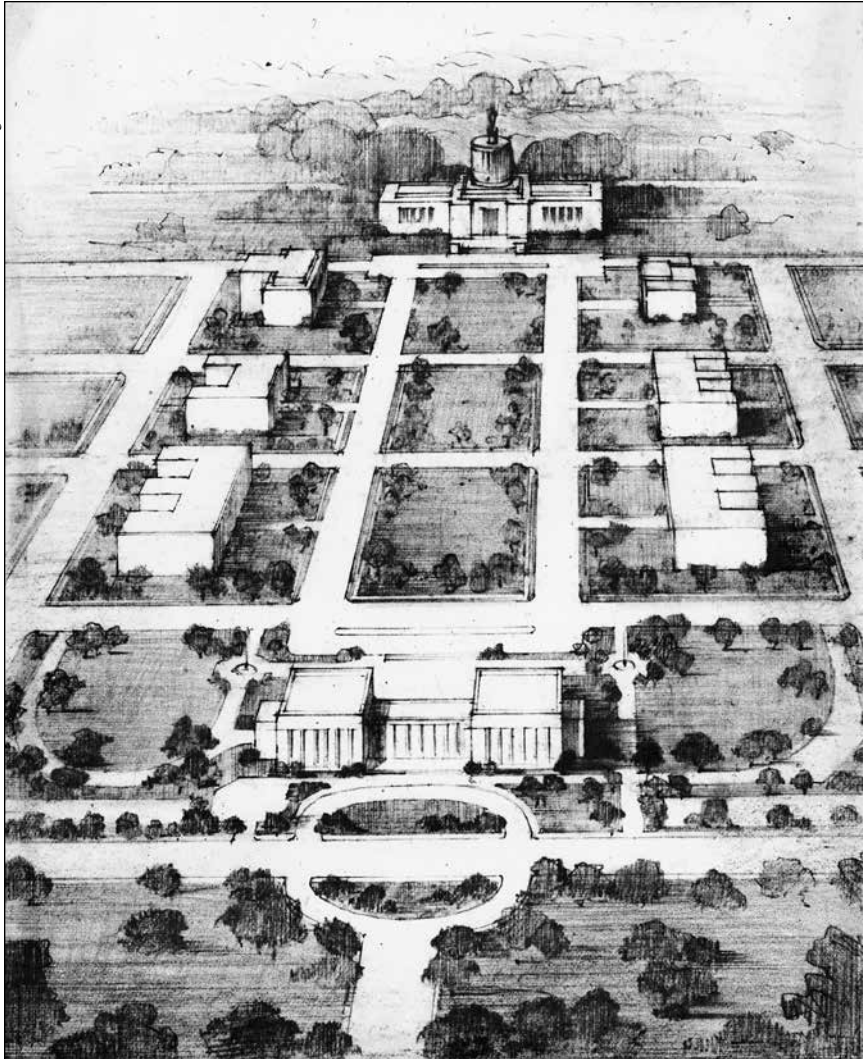
This sketch shows the 1855 territorial Capitol (Salem), which was also destroyed by fire. The two-story, wooden frame structure had a temple front in the Greek Revival style.



Legislators used this and several other commercial buildings in Salem during the period between the loss of the first and the opening of the second Capitol (1855–1876).



Breyman Fountain, located in Willson Park, stood in front of the second Statehouse. The ornamental fountain, a memorial to Oregon pioneers, was a gift to the City of Salem from merchant Werner Breyman in 1904. The fountain is fifteen feet tall and cast in iron. The fountain's top element, a pioneer figure shading his gaze, was a popular image used in memorial fountains throughout the West during the early twentieth century.

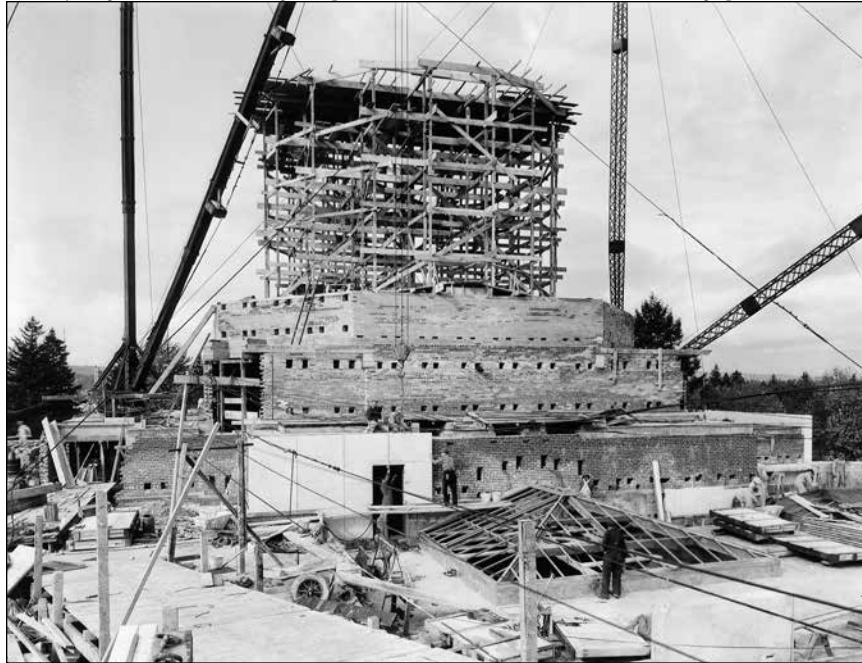


The State Capitol Reconstruction Commission adopted architect Francis Keally's plan for the new Capitol Mall (3.4 acres), which laid out a Beaux-Arts style organization of the grounds stretching north from the Capitol (this view faces south, with the Capitol at the top). Three perpendicular landscaped blocks are shown bordered by arterial streets, which are flanked by stylistically compatible state office buildings. This was a radical reorientation of the capitol grounds, as the previous Capitol had faced west toward downtown Salem. The entire Capitol grounds, including parkland on the east and west sides of the building as well as the north plaza, grew from 5 acres to 14.5 acres. The Capitol Planning Commission, established by the legislature in 1949 to oversee orderly development of the Capitol Mall, has continued to follow Keally's master plan.

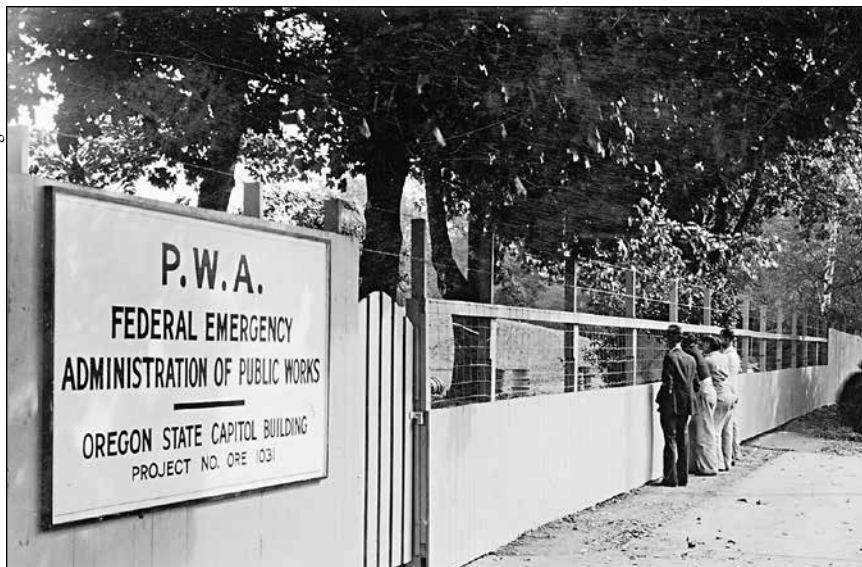


This aerial shot of the Capitol Mall, taken in about 1980, shows how development to the north of the Capitol generally adhered to Keally's plan. The bottom of the photo shows the new, compatible addition to the Capitol that was designed by the Portland architectural firm of Wolf, Zimmer, Gunsel, Frasca and was completed in 1977.

Courtesy Oregon State Archives, Oregon Capitol Reconstruction Commission Records, Photograph #OCR 0050



OHS digital no. ba016266



ABOVE: A construction photo shows work underway on the upper portion (rotunda) of the central section of the Capitol. A worker is standing near a skylight on one of the building's wings, while other workers are beginning to apply the Vermont marble cladding to the reinforced concrete walls.

BELOW: A peekhole was made in the fence because of popular demand to watch construction of the building.



OHS digital no. ba016295

The large mural entitled News of State Hood, 1859, by Frank Schwarz, sits above the president's desk in the Senate Chamber. The scene portrays downtown Salem, where the legislature convened in rented quarters, and the arrival of the news that Congress had granted Oregon statehood.

OHS digital no. bbor0230



OHS digital no. OrHf6535



ABOVE: An eleven-by-twenty-six-foot mural by Barry Faulkner covers the southeast corner of the Rotunda and depicts Natives greeting Yankee Robert Gray, captain of the Columbia Rediviva, in the act of being the first non-Native to enter the Columbia River estuary in 1792.

BELOW AND TOP RIGHT: Artists work to create the piece, one of many historically themed murals that fill the covered contours of the Rotunda.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Spectators watch as the Kenneth Poorman Company transports sculptor Ulric Ellerhusen's Golden Pioneer, the twenty-three-foot-high statue that tops the Capitol.

OHS digital no. 29027

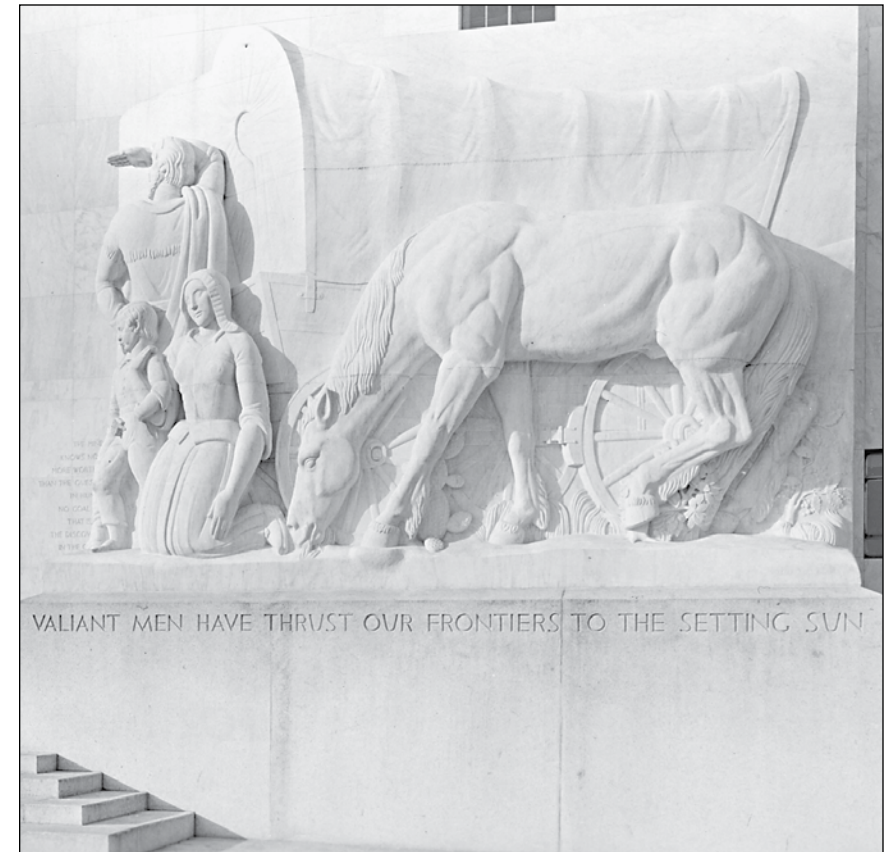


OHS digital no. 45583





A dramatic view shows the Capitol's dominant ribbed lantern, surmounted by the gilded bronze statue of the Oregon Pioneer by Ulric Ellerhusen.



One of a pair of sculptural blocks by Leo Friedlander at the base of the front entrance to the Capitol sits at the west side of the entrance and shows the Oregon Trail emigrants with a Conestoga wagon.

SOURCES

- Goodsell, Charles T. *The American Statehouse: Interpreting Democracy's Temples*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001.
- Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, and William Seale. *Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the USA*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
- Thrane, Susan W., and Tom Patterson. *State Houses: America's 50 State Capitol Buildings*. Erin, Ont.: Boston Mills Press, 2005.
- Potter, Elizabeth W., and James Hamrick. "Oregon State Capitol." National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 1988.