

SAVE OUR CITY!

THE DEMOLITION OF PHOENIX'S ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

By Mark Fink



There's a public outcry raging right underneath our noses. Strong words like "sickening," "outrageous" and "atrocious" are being tossed around, and it has nothing to do with immigration reform or health care. Nor is it about our current President or America's latest military quagmire. Issues all worthy of getting worked into a lather about, to be sure. But this outcry is entirely local and non-political. Let's just say that it has more to do with rooflines and lighting fixtures than foreign policy and work visas.

Welcome, my friends, to the message board of modernphoenix.net. Devoted to the awareness and preservation of mid-century modern buildings around the Valley, the website and its highly vociferous visitors have certainly done their homework—and boy are they pissed. The tone of many of the threads is more *McLaughlin Group* than *Architectural Digest*, and the agitation level among its members seems to be rising. But why?

Well, because they live here in Phoenix, that's why. In case you haven't noticed—or do not hail from the Valley—our city is losing its already anorexic architectural identity at a rapidly increasing rate. Buildings from such local architectural legends as Ralph Haver, Ed Varney, Frank Henry and Al Beadle are disappearing left and right, being replaced with what could best be described as urban ubiquity: commercial buildings whose designs are simply lifted from other locations nationwide, born from out-of-state corporate think tanks rather than a single architect's vision. Thoughtfully designed banks, office complexes, movie theaters and the like are meeting their end unceremoniously under the tread of earthmovers quicker than you can say "condominiums." Sadly, much of it is met with maddening public ambivalence.

The issue of building preservation is fraught with preciosity, leading many to wonder where it will end. What one person regards as

the architectural equivalent of a leisure suit, another may see as a wondrous example of the modernist aesthetic—leaving one to question which buildings are worthy of rescue, and which are best forgotten. This wide chasm of gray area is exactly where many buildings in the Valley fall. These aren't the historic district dollhouses most have come to associate with preservation. Rather, they are the pedestrian-minded structures that are too new to be considered old enough to save, yet too old to be considered relevant enough to keep.

According to Alison King, who runs modernphoenix.net, there are two distinct camps here in the Valley. "There are the people who consider these buildings to be eyesores and terribly dated. Then there's a new generation who are really seeing these buildings with fresh eyes. To them, it all looks new again," she says. Her mission with modernphoenix.net is to bring together mid-century minded people and hopefully

create one big, forward-thinking voice. Another goal is to tap in to Phoenix's growing status as a destination for California transplants with (ahem) deep pockets—and hopefully a little more vision. "California really pioneered the whole casual living lifestyle, and it's a little more rooted in their culture." To her, Californians have a deeper appreciation for mid-century architecture as well as a stronger inclination to save it, even if it's in their adopted home of Phoenix. Sending in the reinforcements is an idea whose time may have come.

We certainly could have used the cavalry coming over the hill these past few months, when the mid-century preservationists were dealt a one-two punch in the span of just 28 days. Both the Washburn Piano building on 20th Street and Camelback and the former Valley National Bank location at Rural and Apache in Tempe met the wrecking ball, raising the risk of losing our architectural history to near-epidemic proportions.

Where there was a minor problem gathering steam for years, there is now a crisis. "I was sick to my stomach over it," says Alison, of hearing the grim news. The Tempe "dome," a minor mid-century marvel in gold dating back to 1962—compliments of local architects Weaver and Drover, assisted briefly by Frank Henry—was a playful reflection of Kennedy-era optimism. It was locally significant due in part to its being commissioned by Phoenix 40 co-founder and Valley philanthropist Walter Bimson, who was responsible for a number of modernist banks in the 1960s that helped shape the early architectural identity of the Valley.

This building would not have looked out of place at a World's Fair (perhaps as an attraction like the Carousel of Progress), a shimmering vision of the future in its time, as well as being one of the Valley's first drive-through banks. It is fondly remembered by many for its innovative use of 23,000 metal "cards" placed at right angles to

each other, hung from its ceiling to diffuse and reflect the fluorescent lights above. The iconic dome dutifully served for 45 years, right up until its date with the wrecking ball. Not all was lost, however. Preservationists claimed a minor victory before seeing this beloved bank reduced to rubble. ASU agreed to save the building's trademark gold geodesic dome for posterity—lifting it fully intact by crane, to the amazement of bystanders—and promises to save it, even challenging ASU's College of Design students to create ideas for reusing it. A small win amid a huge loss, but a rare and conscientious gesture nonetheless.

The Washburn Piano building also began life as a bank—a First Federal Savings and Loan, to be specific. Designed by architect Ed Varney in 1964 (who also designed the Hotel Valley Ho, which has, thankfully, been given a second life), it became a MeraBank in the eighties, and then changed identities again in 1990 when it became >>

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a showroom for Washburn Pianos. The pianos stayed until 2005, when, ironically, the California owner closed a deal that would ultimately do away with the structure entirely in order to build—what else?—a bank. Undoubtedly, whatever is built in its place will have a low probability of turning heads the way Washburn did. Its gold-trimmed roofline zigzagging around the circular edifice, with lighting fixtures and entry canopy to match, making it one of the true standouts along Camelback Road.

I asked Alison why, of all the commercial buildings of the 1960s, banks seemed to reap the benefits of the best mid-century design. “I think they wanted to set a certain tone for their customers that said, ‘you’re not back East anymore,’” she theorizes. “It reflected the breezy optimism of the West, as opposed to the more staid Gothic or Brownstone aesthetic in East Coast financial institutions.” This naturally led to more open floor plans and the implementation of a modernist design palette including glass, concrete and steel (“the holy trinity,” she jokes). These, along with regionally inspired pop-art murals, stained glass, desert masonry and clean

lines, made banks in the West a different breed entirely.

Going further up the street from the now-defunct Washburn site, on 44th Street and Camelback, is another Frank Henry/Walter Bimson collaboration. Also built as a Valley National Bank (now a Chase branch), this modernist miracle has been with us since 1968, but its future is in serious doubt. Reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright in its curvaceous blending of stone and concrete (both inside and out), the design heavily and repetitiously emphasizes circles to amazing effect. The exterior blends effortlessly with the interior, almost organically, while the building’s most noteworthy ornamentation—the mushroom-like “dendriform,” or tree-shaped, columns—are placed randomly both inside and out.

Recently the Opus West Company revealed plans to do away with this landmark entirely. The Minneapolis-based real estate developers have reportedly announced their intentions to use the land to construct more high-end condominiums, as if Phoenix is in danger of having too few of that type of thing. This justifies a certain amount of panic and dismay among people like Alison and the members of modernphoenix.net.

The Camelback “dendriform” branch isn’t some lowbrow, stylistic folly or a derelict building in its second or third incarnation. It’s an architecturally revered structure, historically relevant and one of the last of its kind. Not to mention still fully functional and pristinely maintained. If a building as widely appreciated as this one could go, then what is safe?

While we’re on the topic of banks, I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that it hasn’t been all bad news for the mid-century preservationist movement. For all the recent losses, as well as the bleak prospects for many more like them, there are a handful of exceptions. One of the more noteworthy examples is the former Valley National Bank branch on Scottsdale and Highland, dubbed the “Safari” branch due to its proximity to the old Safari resort property in Scottsdale. Another Frank Henry design, the building was scheduled for demolition in 1997 by the Hilton Company, but was rescued in part by neighborhood protests. It is now occupied by Haus and Design Within Reach, who are, not surprisingly, utilizing the space and its design to the fullest potential that a preservationist could hope for. Also rehabilitated by a worthy

occupant is the long, low, flat-roofed VNB building on 2nd Avenue and Indian School, which now, fittingly, plays host to the design firm of Hoskin Ryan Consultants.

These buildings were saved in the nick of time, but their fate could have played out much differently. As the previous examples illustrate, there’s a tragic amount of indifference toward these mid-century landmarks all over the Valley. Aside from the worthy attempts at carefully orchestrated protests, we must hope for like-minded business owners to step in and bring these buildings back from their endangered status.

Although much attention has been paid lately to the fate of our bank buildings, the trend toward discarding mid-century commercial landmarks is anything but limited in scope. It knows no bounds and generally won’t be swayed by sentimentality or public outcry. Take the Ralph Haver-designed Cine Capri, for example. Despite being historically relevant, profitable and hugely popular—not to mention the last of a dying breed of single-screen movie theaters—it was razed in 1998 to clear space for a towering office building and a Starbucks. Therein lies a hard lesson learned by Phoenicians: public outcry and popularity will rarely outweigh corporate opportunism in this city. As for historical significance, out-of-state developers generally don’t take a vested interest in local preservation. And while reinventing ourselves has become something of a mantra here in Phoenix, the epic game of one-upmanship that we’re engaged in with bigger cities is not without some major civic repercussions. “Constantly reinventing yourself leads to little continuity with the past,” says Alison. In other words, a loss of identity.

Are we headed toward a seemingly endless expanse of “big box” chain stores and franchised family restaurants with little left in the way of personality? Alison sees a somewhat alarming trend, one that stands in opposition to what is usually seen in a growing city. “In most cities with urban growth, the outlying areas are an extension of the city center. In Phoenix, the outlying areas seem to be eating their way into the center. Phoenix is beginning to look more like Ahwatukee instead of the other way around.” Scary stuff.

For those of us who have lived here all our lives, watching this city being stripped of the identity that our buildings once gave us is frustrating to come to terms with. Walter Bimson had said that the banks he commissioned were a gift to the city, and this sentiment could apply to so many other structures, if only it were seen that way. The modernphoenix.net website is a gift to people who do see it that way, and it’s a call to action for those who want things to change—or rather, those who want certain things to stay the same. While there’s nothing of consequence anyone can do about the buildings we’ve already lost (the Cine Capri’s massive screen is now in a multiplex in Scottsdale, in a classic example of missing the point entirely), the website is a reminder that our hands aren’t completely tied when it comes to the ones we still have.

British comedian Eddie Izzard joked once about how Americans seem astounded when a building is restored to the way it looked over fifty years ago, as we can barely comprehend something that old. The show was taped in San Francisco, where the joke got a big laugh. Sadly, if it had been taped in Phoenix, the bit probably would have been met with a nervous laugh—and the embarrassing ring of truth. ■