

The Ugly Cover-Up

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By Andrew Phillips

Can we, as a city, learn to live with buildings that, to some, are embarrassing? If some people view a building or structure as ugly, do we need to solve this aesthetic problem? Or can so-called eyesores contribute to a city's diversity and appeal?

Ugly to many, the Bon Marche Parking Garage has always seemed to me beautiful for its boldness and honesty. Clear in structure and function, the garage is a true Modernist building. Its structure—large concrete columns intersecting the waffle slabs—can be clearly understood. The corkscrew ramp twisting at the northeast corner defines the widest angle of this downtown site. On the west side, the stairs crisscross through a concrete grid. The building isn't fancy, it has no special adornment, just the needed elements well composed in a rigorous structural system. Most impressively, the function of the building, the storage of cars, is obvious from every sidewalk. The cars precariously perched at the edge of each floor slab appear like merchandise on display. As they move along the upper slabs or the ramp, the building becomes dynamic.

The garage, specifically built to accommodate the Bon Marché department store, stands as a symbol of how the business of parking developed in Seattle in the 1950s and '60s. With competition from suburban shopping malls, downtown merchants needed to provide parking in close proximity to attract customers. Built and operated by the Circular Ramp Garage Co., the Bon Marché parking garage was unique for its circular ramp design. At the time only one similar garage, the Downtown Center Garage in San Francisco, had been built—by the same company.

George A. Gore, President of the Circular Ramp Garage Co, was an inventor who came up with the design. He worked with prominent San Francisco architect George Applegarth, who drew up the plans. Applegarth, a *Beaux-Arts*-trained architect, was a prolific designer of residences and many public buildings in the Bay Area. His early work exhibited the symmetry, proportions, and details typical of the restrained *Beaux Arts* elegance. These two garages represent bold creations from an architect making a gigantic leap from grand civic architecture to a new garage typology.

When the Bon Marché Parking Garage opened in 1960, advertisements touted it as the "Finest Parking Facility in the World." Early in 2006, the garage, recently sold to the developer of a mixed-use tower across the alley, was

branded an eyesore. Press releases at the time showed renderings of the structure covered in a new cast-stone facade with punch windows. A fascinating structure—whether ugly or not—might become another bland garage trying not to be a garage.

Rallying the public against a structure's alleged aesthetic popularity problem is common. On May 24, 2006, Mayor Nickels announced that his staff had dreamed up a satirical video mocking the concept of keeping the Alaskan Way Viaduct on the Seattle Waterfront. In the video, a man claiming to represent the *Committee to Save Big Ugly Things* makes a funny and ridiculous argument for the preservation of this overhead freeway in order to defend against an alleged conspiracy to rid the city of all its big ugly things. While its structural condition and the city's need for a viable waterfront may eventually doom the viaduct, this video's real success will be affirming the ease at exploiting Seattle's collective insecurity and further lowering the debate about our city's design. As with the debates about the Monorail's concrete columns and tracks, the Kingdome, and the King County Administration Building, the labels *ugly* and *eyesore* create an immediate and inhospitable arena for real debate, which could instead focus on more quantifiable issues such as sustainability, feasibility, usefulness, and historical value. The most dubious example of this strategy occurred with the previous two downtown libraries. The classically designed Carnegie built in 1906, and its Modernist predecessor built in 1960, were both labeled "eyesores" in the press. Reading the newspaper articles, printed 40 years apart, gives an eerie sense of *deja vu*.

Currently, the owners of the Bon Marché Parking Garage are exploring other options that may leave the upper parking decks exposed and, perhaps, enhance the original design, while giving the street-level retail a deserved updating. The edifice may last to face another generation's appreciation or scorn.

Destroying or covering up pieces of the city we perceive as embarrassing, like ignoring a high school's nerdy teenager, may initially appear to be an easy solution. However, quick aesthetic judgments may later prove to have been shortsighted. Would the old Carnegie library still be considered ugly today? A common saying in politics has it that "It's not the crime that will sink you; it's the cover-up." Whether the crime was these structures' aesthetic or our need to constantly re-invent ourselves hoping to get attention from all the popular cities, we should attempt to address the crime with something other than a shallow cover-up.

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