Learning from Gerald Gerron

by Susan Boyle

Gerald Gerron of the McKinley Architects spoke at the University of Washington last month to an audience of students, teachers and professionals. A lengthy question/answer period followed. A lengthy question/answer period followed. A lengthy question/answer period followed. A lengthy question/answer period followed.

When it ended, many in the audience felt that Gerron had advanced the cause of contextualism and the idea of downtown zoning reform further than all the speakers at last Fall's Urban Design Block Symposium.

Gerron was one of four Wintertide celeb.rity invited... -... by the AIA AIA Region 9 Committee to present public lectures on their work. The invitation may have been extended to Gerron due to his position as a designer of commercial work in Seattle (John Fluke, KING Broadcasting, the 1111 Building). It's more likely that he was invited due to the notoriety of the proposed CENTA Towers, two blue highrise structures designed for the block at First and University, now occupied by the Skate de Skate.

Gerron's own local reputation comes from his view of Seattle's future, articulated in a Seattle Times article last fall and in an interview in the Seattle Business Journal. His frank condemnation of Seattle ("if you look closely you will find no personality") and its architecture (as "vanilla pudding") put many on the defensive. His implication in the SBJ interview, that local architects were somehow guiltless, sent waves of indignation through architects and developers in community. So while some people may have come to Gerron's lecture to hear him speak of his work, most came to hear his views refuted. Mental tomatoes were prepared for throwing.

What happened, however, was not a refutation. Gerron stood firm in openly defending his role as a form-giver and as a tool of his clients. He continually referred to himself as a realist who creates clear images for the newly-arrived developer, who logically relates his work to an eternal context of natural phenomena — sky and clouds — rather than an ever-changing physical neighborhood. And as he had done earlier, Gerron provided quotable quotes:

On Contextualism: "Of course (buildings) don't relate to one another (due to) the lack of a definition of relationship or urban fabric. Contextualism is an abstract and unachievable idea ... The urban fabric is transitory. The context of the past is gone forever."

On Seattle's future: "Mediocre legacies will no longer be tolerated in this city ... The continued on Page Four R/UDAT Update: Giving Downtown that "Lived-In" Look by Don Miles

April 30-May 3 the Seattle Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) will sponsor with community representatives to form the Urban Design Assistance Team (RUDAT) entitled LIVING DOWNTOWN, focusing on downtown residential land use and development. The out-of-town team members donate their time and pledge not to accept commissions which may result from their recommendations. Consequently, they can be unbiased and objective in their assessment of Seattle's needs. Expenses for the team visit (approximately $20,000) including travel, accommodations and production are funded by local contributions. Chairpersons for the Seattle RUDAT are Don Miles, Jerry Ernst and Rolf Preuss. A local steering committee of Chapter members and community, governmental, and business representatives has been formed.

The Seattle AIA Chapter applied to the National AIA RUDAT Task Force in January. In March, Taskforce member, Ben Cunningham of Minneapolis visited Seattle to evaluate our proposal. During a two-day visit, Cunningham met with community, business, design and governmental leaders.

Cunningham and his Taskforce have approved the Seattle RUDAT application and are now selecting the team and team leader. The team leader will make a reconnaissance visit to Seattle in mid-April.

The following focus has been suggested as a result of his visit:

1-Housing Definition. Communicate the variety of potential housing types, price ranges and use-relationships in both narrative and graphic form. Produce visual images of appropriate housing including rehab and infill.

2-Role Definition. Define the appropriate roles of the public and private sectors in creating new housing stock and managing potential social and economic impacts.

3-Process and Regulation. Describe a development process that provides for neighborhood participation while offering an acceptable level of predictability for the developer and the city. Examine related design controls and other regulations.

4-Implementation Tools. Examine the financial and development tools available to the private and public sector.

Continued on Page Four Anti-Aircraft Requirements for Highrises; Dateline April First

In the wake of a highly-publicized incident last month, in which an Argentinian Airlines jet narrowly missed New York's World Trade Center, the Seattle Department of Transportation is preparing strict new rules governing aircraft-impact resistance in high-rise structures. William Just-One, director of the Department, confirmed that the action is forthcoming.

Cause for the concern, he said, was the frequency of low-level approaches to Sea-Tac and Boeing Field passing over downtown Seattle and the "temp­ tation some pilots have to smash some of them myself. Luckily I'm not a pilot."

Provisions of the new code, which could go into effect as early as this summer, include:

-A rule that will increase in lateral bracing requirements for buildings over 300 feet in height, coupled with additional requirements in curtain walls. These requirements would ensure that impacting aircraft would not do much structural damage to the building or interrupt communications equipment.

-Outlet coverage of the building exterior which would be above and below each floor and a layer of foam immediately following a col­ lision. Officials have suggested the use of a soap foam (something like shaving cream) so that the windows could be cleaned at the same time.

-An FAA-trained flight controller in each building, equipped with radar and the necessary radio-communication equipment.

Development is apparently adamently opposed to this position of the code. Martin Ceiling, whose 75-story Columnar Center will be the city's tallest building yet, is reported to be negotiating a compromise solution. This is just not economically feasible," he commented, "We'll give them the flight controller, but we think it's enough to give them a pair of binoculars and let him resort to shouts and arm-waving." Flashlights would be provided for night-time use, he said.

"The Department is also consider­ ing an injunction against blue glass buildings, although, as an official pointed out, "It's not the blue glass by itself, but the glass in combination with the grid of the window frames. That surface grid denies the third dimension and lessens the impact of the building. It makes it practically disappear; pilots wouldn't be able to see it." Another official said that the Department has not yet examined all possible solutions to the problem, but that most other solutions offered thus far presented insurmountable difficul­ ties. One person suggested not building the skyscrapers so high, he said, but this was quickly dismissed as unrealistic. "What we really need," said a local architect, "is a force field that would make planes bounce away if they get too close." He said that this solution was probably too "high-tech," and that a less costly method might be "some kind of automatic system" that would detect when a plane was on a collision course for a building and then shut it down.

Alan Ratliff illustrates the need for his M.Arch thesis by producing occasional involuntary euthanasia on the current state of architecture; 2-4, 9, 13, 15, 16.
EVENT OF THE MONTH: THE OPE WORKSHOPS

If you have opinions as to what downtown Seattle is looking like these days, or if you have a vision for its future shape, now is the time to put on your "civic involvement" hat and make your thoughts known. A series of workshops is being held this month in which the City's Office of Policy and Evaluation (O.P.E.) will present background material compiled for the Downtown Land Use planning effort, now underway. It's a chance to rank the most crucial issues as you see them. On April 21, the eight workshop leaders (citizens, not bureaucrats) will join Mayor Royer for a Public Forum to discuss what the workshops have revealed. The eight workshops are listed on the calendar during the first two weeks of April. For more information, contact OPE at 625-4575.


Application deadline for the June qualifying exam is April 20. Call Olympia for information: 1-753-3875.

John Runstad hosts YMCA, 5:00-7:00 PM.

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WALKING TOUR: Rob Anglin leads a tour of Ravenna Gardens, sponsored by the Seattle Public Library, Free with pre-registration by calling 625-4893. Brochures and speakers explaining the City's new Master Use Permit process are now available from the Permit Project Office, 625-2008.

FRIDAY DINNER: "Embellishment Beyond Function" continues at the Henry Gallery/UW through April 18. This show includes handcrafted furniture, architectural ceramics and graphic design.

OPE WORKSHOP: Jarleth Hume hosts, Sea-First Bldg., Conference Room, 12-2:00 PM.

LECTURE: Howard Droker, Resident Historian at the Public Library speaks on "Seattle's Grand Amusement Parks: From Luna Park to Seattle Center," 7:30 PM, University Branch Library, Free.


LECTURE: Charles Q. Bay Area Planner and Executive Director of the Seattle Housing Resources Group. 7:30 PM, Lakeside School, 1501 - 10th Ave. East.

LECTURE: Kent and the Planning Commission host. Pike Place Market P.D.A. Constituency Meeting, 6:30 PM, Market Bingo Hall above Soames Dumm Building.

OUT-OF-TOWN LECTURE: Rodolfo Machado, Architect and Dean at RISD, speaks in Portland on "The City in Transition." 8 PM at the First Presbyterian Church, 1200 SW Alder Street. Sponsored by the Portland AIA.

OPE WORKSHOP PUBLIC FORUM: Civic leaders summarize the Downtown Land Use Workshops. For time and place, call OPE at 625-4575.

LECTURE: Kenneth Halpern, Director of the NYC Planning Office, speaks on "Downtown USA: Urban Design in America," using 9 cities for case studies. 8 PM, 322 Gould Hall, UW.

LECTURE: "Speculation on the Development of Urban Form in Brazil" by ASLA member Julian Charnley. 8 PM, 322 Gould Hall, UW.

According to Newsweek's March 16th issue, the 46 million dollars the Administration proposed cutting from the arts endowment is in fact less than the Defense Department will spend this year on military bands!! Write your congressmen to show your concern.

SEMINAR: "Promotion and Public Relations," a seminar lead by Ronald Stickney and sponsored by the Architectural Secretaries Association, 7:00-9:00 PM. Call Mary Vrewnik for registration information, 454-5723.


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EVENT OF THE WEEK, April 1-4.

The Society of Architectural Historians and the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada are co-sponsoring a Joint Annual Meeting at the Empress Hotel in Victoria, April 1-6. Their programs, some of which are mentioned on the calendar, are both diverse and impressive. Registration for SAH members for the entire meeting is $20.00, $30.00 for non-members and $5.00 for single sessions. For attendance to only one morning or afternoon session, register at 9-10:30 AM at the Empress Lobby the day of the symposium.

The slide presentations listed on the calendar are only a few of those available. If we are lucky, speakers at this conference will be enticed by local architectural groups to speak also in Seattle. If that's the case, it may be too late for our press date, so keep your eyes wide.

On April 9, three professors from the UW, Norman Johnston, Grant Hildebrand and David Streifeld, will present their papers given at Victoria, and report on the conference. 322 Gould Hall at UW, 8 p.m.

EVENT OF THE WEEK, MACHADO IN PORTLAND, APRIL 20.

Rodolfo Machado, a finalist in last year's Portland Pioneer Courthouse Square Competition, will speak on urban magic, civil and well-mannered buildings, ideology and public spaces, and the myth of human scale. Machado is famous for the extremes of imagery in his design work, as in the award-winning "Steps of Providence." This lecture is the third in a series on "The City Pleasurable," sponsored by the Portland AIA. Coming up: Edmund Bacon in May and Charles Moore in June.

Portland Bound? Urban walking tours are available twice each morning, Tuesday through Friday, through mid-June. Tours of the Downtown, Old Town and the Transit Mall are popular with adults ($2.00) and with children (50c). Call the Urban Tour Office at Workday Tours, 322-4444, for information.

Check out the extensive calendar of Energy Information Lectures, sponsored by the Washington Energy Extension Service and available from Seattle and King County Public Libraries, Puget Power and Seattle City Light.

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO WESTLAKES? King County Superior Court Judge Frank Howard recently ruled that a city loan of public credit to private enterprise would be illegal if Seattle were to go ahead with this downtown development proposal. City officials say they plan to appeal this ruling, as well as an earlier one. The former judgment denied the City's right to condemn private property. It ruled that the design concept of a "public focus" was too vague to act as a rationale for condemnation.

ARCADE APRIL

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Editors: Catherine Barrett, Susan Boyle, Katrina Deines, Ann Hirschi


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Gerald Gerron continued from Page One

crisis is in not seeing the city as a whole. . . . Pieces are too small to deal with the deep underlying issues. . . . The big plan is the realistic plan.

On Highrises: "Singlemindedness gives highrises their drama. Dramatization is justified as a goal as solving the predicament (of human scale) . . . The unavoidable clash of scales must be accepted in the public realm.

On His Designs: "The base is dedicated to the pedestrian. (It's) a rich ground-level contribution to the city. . . . an explosion of space on 2nd Avenue. . . . The building will complement adjacent buildings when practical. . . . (The) sky . . . The surface grid denies the third dimension and lessens the (visual) impact of the building.

Gerron is an interesting figure, but he is quoted here at some length not because his views are unusual. Rather, he articulates some very commonly held and persistent attitudes toward the city and its architecture. Audience reaction to these views was as expected. Gerron was questioned about his seeming antagonism to history. His response: 'We don't live in a Cotswold village.' He was challenged by two people who favor a lively physical record of cultural continuity, a hierarchy of meaningful buildings and spaces, and a preservation of the traditional streetscape. These notions he dismissed as an academic, unrealistic and unachievable in the economic reality of downtown. Gradually the evening dissipated into a clash of two separate realities. Each viewed by The Other, they became "the Ivory Tower Idealist" vs. "The Shock Designer of Flash and Dash.

People who had anticipated that there might be a real dialogue left the lecture frustrated. "Diversity and "intervenements" were concepts tossed about by both sides, but to one these meant economy. Clear social diversity and the other a diversity of skyline and built containers. One vision is based upon a total sum of experiences of being in the city; the other a separate perception, a glancing upon downtown as a beautiful-object. Thus there was none of the exchange of ideas that one would expect from an encounter about civic architecture or from a lecture on the CBD. The evening was grid and polemics. Can there be in part to Gerron's personal blindness to the meaning of what city life, as civic life, is all about. In an earlier interview, he claimed that "anything a building looks like comes out of my head." Hearing him speak, and seeing his work, I believe that for Gerron this is true.

Contextual designers believe something quite different. They trust specific physical surroundings to provide with them clues in creating new forms, forms that can accommodate the human mix that makes up an urban environment. They know that economic and social diversity are signs of a long-term healthy place. This assumption underlies their notions of inclusiveness and diversity.

What urbanists, contextualists and preservationists don't know, if their evening with Gerald Gerron is any indication, is that to further their vision, they must clarify it. If an inclusive ethic is one can be achieved, must be examined against the forces and ideas that Gerald Gerron represents. Clear social diversity and order and clear answers must be forthcoming. We should be thankful to Gerron for his provocations, ironically, by his blind opposition to it. But other questions remain: Is contextualism simply a formal view of architecture -- a mimicry of surrounding scale? If there is a social or economic component, how can this too be achieved in a private sector economy? Can there be an "appropriate hierarchy" of spaces and buildings that users and clients will recognize and accept? Are there examples of these kinds of places in Seattle, or must we rely on historic or foreign prototypes? And if so, are these examples appropriate to the here and now? How can these ideals, of contrast and diversity, be translated effectively into zoning tools?

These questions are the subject of more and more public and professional discussion with the rapid development of Seattle (see Peter Stern's "Downtown Seattle: Getting Uglier and Working Worse." The Architecture, 3/10/81). The questions will arise again this month during the OPE Workshops on Downtown Planning. Those of us who believe in a give-and-take sort of city and who envision contextual architecture as a container for diversity, had better examine the ideas of Gerald Gerron. We will meet them again.

For more thoughts on contextualism, see the following:

"Architects and Fred Koetter, Collage City, Stuart Cohen, "Including it All" in Oppositions 2, Fred Koetter's Harvard Architectural Review. Graham Shane on the subject, AD, 11/76. Look also to the slotted entry on Second Avenue to the Exchange and Norton Buildings, First Avenue between Pike Street and Virginia Street, at the square at Pioneer Square, at the Pike and Virginia Building, at Westlake.

Susan Boyle is a graduate of the University of Washington's Masters Program and is presently working at Olson Walter Architects.

THE A.R.C.A.D.E. ACRONYM CONTEST or April Really Can Assist Dreary Editors

The Acronym Contest made a big hit with some readers. We received a fairly wide range of clever responses, proving that architects have a sense of humor. We also got several WITHOUT a subscription check, proving that architects are a lot of self-confidence! Why pay for a subscription when you can win one?

There were some pithy questions:

Ain't Real Cool Architecture Damn Easy!

Are Rational Caring Architects Dying Everywhere?

Are Rude Competitive Architects Dreadful Elites?

Some design observations:

Architects Routinely Converse About Design Environment.
Architectural Realism Can Affect Design Environment.

All Round Corners Are Dubious Edges.

A flattering description of the newest architectural publication in town: "Contextual Architecture looks to ARCADE for Astute Reporting, Calendars, and Discerning (Dull or? Dull or? Dull or?) Esterics.

But, after a month of editing this paper's "Downtown Seattle. Getting the Chose the winning entry, by Arthur Pfeil.

Any Reason Crazy Architects Die Early?

International News

Professor Hermann G. Punzi, of the UW Departments of Architecture and Art History, has just returned from Berlin. This visit was in honor of the 200th birthday of the German neoclassical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Professor Punzi, along with three former students from Chicago, went to Berlin to present the Mayor with a gold-emboosed first copy of the new facsimile edition of Schinkel's work, originally published in 1866. The new edition has a preface by Philip Johnson and essays by Professor Punzi, who also wrote Schinkel's Berlin. The new volume is published by Exedra Books and is limited to 1000 copies.

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