

The Oregonian

Opinion: A building too weird for even Portlandia

By David Sarasohn

So to all the other dismal aspects of the Portland Building, we can now add a new one: a \$95 million estimate for repairs.

It's not hard to imagine why the price is so high. Looking at the building, you'd wonder where in the universe the contractors would get parts.

The Portland Building, after all, doesn't really look like anything else. All huge blue tiles, colored glass and odd pastel flourishes meant to evoke early modern French paintings, it's always looked like something designed by a Third World dictator's mistress's art-student brother, setting off an upheaval in the palace, and possibly a revolution.

A few years ago, it comfortably made it onto Travel + Leisure magazine's list of the ugliest buildings in the world, closely following a tourist hotel in North Korea and the Ohio headquarters of a picnic basket company, a building shaped like – yes – a picnic basket.

To try to humanize the building, the city affixed to the front of it a huge two-story statue of Portlandia, a figure locals had never known existed – unless personal legal problems had given them lots of occasions to study the city seal – but who quickly became popular, eventually getting her own TV show. Portlandia became so popular, in fact, that Portlanders swiftly began proposing to move her someplace else. (This has been an awkward situation for Portlandia herself. Reportedly, it has taken several interventions by city labor negotiators to keep her from walking off the building.)

The Portland Building was a product of what might be called the city's Paleo Cool stage, the early '80s, when Portland was just switching from lumber to lattes, beginning to think it might actually have a unique identity. It was a time that seemed to call for a statement building, a municipal center announcing that Portland was a different city than you might think, a statement to both out-of-town visitors and to locals coming in to try to keep their water from being turned off.

There was something to be said for that attitude. There was less to be said for the building itself.

For a public building charged with making a statement to its citizens and taxpayers, it had a distinctly unwelcoming lobby resembling a public rest room – and not one of the classier facilities, but something on the sketchier parts of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The lobby required some reconstruction after just eight years, an embarrassing situation for a municipal building standing next to a City Hall more than a century old. (You always had the feeling that the Portland Building was an edifice that other buildings giggled about.)

Worse, the building had small windows and bad lighting, seemed to have uneven floors and to leak. It's one thing to Keep Portland Weird; you don't necessarily want to keep Portland workers wet. Nobody ever considered it a good place to work – although in fairness, it can be a good place to park, a curious honor in a city that prides itself on its commitment to alternative transport.

Now, the building needs an estimated \$95 million in reconstruction, although Randy Gragg suggests in Portland Monthly magazine that the city might be able to get it fixed for less. (It's not like we're ever going to be entertaining a lot there.) The enthusiasm for writing the check is limited, with some people suggesting that the Portland Building might be what in Southern California real estate is called a tear-down, with the land being worth a lot more than the building.

Maybe we could put in a Trader Joe's.

City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who's been working with the Portland Building longer than anyone else on the City Council, suggested just taking it down. His new colleague Steve Novick, looking to the also decrepit (but much older) county courthouse across the street, envisioned a new city-county skyscraper, enabling locals to make one-stop visits both to the sewer bureau and their parole officer. It turns out such a building would be very tall and deeply expensive.

But Portland probably won't and shouldn't take down the Portland Building, any more than Disneyland is going to level the Haunted Mansion -- a structure with more than one parallel to the building. The Big Blue Barricade will never be functionally successful, but it is as major municipal monument to the way our thinking too often works: wanting to show we're special, and sometimes ending up all wet.

But if Portlandia walks off the building, time to call in the bulldozers.

The Portland Business Journal

Major League Baseball not a priority for Portland Mayor Charlie Hales

By Rob Smith

Advocates of bringing a Major League Baseball club to Portland say Portland Mayor Charlie Hales and other elected officials strongly support their cause.

A column published late last month on MLB.com — Major League Baseball's official website — claims that Hales has endorsed a site next to Memorial Coliseum and the "new" Rose Garden for a baseball stadium.

Not so, according to Hales aide Dana Haynes. In an email, Haynes told the Business Journal that "this is not a priority project for the mayor; it wasn't in 2013 and it isn't in 2014."

The article, however, quotes architect and baseball supporter Barry Smith as saying, "When we went to the mayor's office, the response was, 'This is too good to be true. What do you need us to do?'"

Haynes' comments are consistent with an in-depth Portland Business Journal cover story last October, in which Hales aide Josh Alpert says the mayor is indifferent to the idea, and a possible site for any stadium is unresolved.

I've spoken with some of the baseball supporters. They're passionate. Their heart is in the right place. They make some good points, chief among them that Portland is the largest region in the U.S. without a Major League Baseball team.

Yet even Rob Neyer, a noted baseball author and national baseball editor at SB Nation, questions any widespread support among Portland city officials — or residents, for that matter.

A lot of things must happen for Portland to land a Major League club. Chief among them is the support of our public officials.

It's clearly not there, however badly baseball supporters want to believe it is.