

MEMO



TO: Oregon City Historic Review Board
Oregon City Commission

DATE: May 20, 2013

PHONE:

ATTENTION:

PROJECT NAME: Oregon City Municipal Elevator Upgrades

PROJECT NUMBER:

SUBJECT: Historic Precedents and Effect of Proposed Changes

Background and Introduction

Metro has provided funds to make minor upgrades to the Oregon City Municipal Elevator, and has retained DAO Architects to provide an appropriate proposal for these upgrades. The project, including paint, lighting, and signage, is to be presented both to the City Commission and to the Historic Review Board for approval, and the City of Oregon City will implement the approved changes. The project is moving quickly as the City would like to have exterior painting completed during the "dry season," prior to September.

As the historic consultant for the project and a member of the project team, Peter Meijer Architect PC (PMA) is providing our professional feedback and informal findings as to the effect of the proposal on the historic integrity of the Elevator. While not yet listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has concurred with previous findings that the Elevator is eligible for the National Register, and it is in the process of being nominated. It was found to be Eligible/Significant in a Multiple Property listing, "Commercial and Public Buildings and Structures in the Downtown and McLoughlin Areas of Oregon City, 1870-1965."

Historic Significance

The Oregon City Municipal Elevator was constructed in 1955, replacing an earlier elevator in the same location along a bluff overlooking the Willamette River. The elevator achieves a pedestrian connection past two barriers; not only the 110-foot grade change, but also the Union Pacific Railroad tracks. The lower entry point is situated just off the two major streets comprising Oregon City's historic downtown, and south of the Singer Hill Creek Falls and concrete stairs. At the top of the bluff is the McLoughlin Promenade, Seventh Street, and other areas of "upper" Oregon City. One reason for the Elevator's historic significance, therefore, is that the Elevator is an innovative and unique development in public transportation in Oregon City. It may be one of only four outdoor municipal elevators in the world, and is probably the only one in the U. S.

The Oregon City Municipal Elevator is historically significant for a second reason, and that is for its architectural and engineering excellence. The Elevator was designed by Gordon E. Trapp of the engineering firm Stevens & Thompson, of Portland. It is generally in a Modern style of architecture, and specifically in a style often referred to as Neo-Expressionism, to distinguish it from other Modern architectural styles such as Brutalism or the rectilinear International Style. Neo-Expressionism in architecture uses organic, aerodynamic shapes, sweeping, curved roof forms and is most often constructed from concrete, especially using thin-shell concrete technological innovations of the time. Other terms used for this same subset of Mid-century Modern Architecture include "exaggerated modern," "Space Age," or "futuristic." Hallmarks of this style include the layered curves of the top observation deck; the clean, uncluttered expression of the vertical shaft form; and the angled windows forming a continuous strip around the top deck.

Sign Proposal:

The existing letters on the front of the curved lower entry wall, spelling out Oregon City Municipal Elevator, will be replaced in the same location. New letters would each be cut-out 12" tall dimensional letters made of anthracite painted metal, with 2" stand-offs (mounting pins). The type face will be appropriate to the historic period. Although larger in size, the new letters would maintain the same architectural intent as the original

letters, spaced evenly with one centered on each vertical concrete panel, thereby highlighting that the wall was designed for the letters. The pins will allow the letters to have a more sculptural effect than they do now. This dimensional, sculptural quality in the forms of the letters will complement the period and especially the style of the structure.

Paint Proposal:

The exterior paint color scheme includes white (shaft) and silver (upper deck form, lower entry wall, and bottom of the shaft). At the interior of the upper observation deck, no changes are proposed; the colors are white at the ceiling and a light greenish blue at the walls. All of the exterior areas to be painted have previously been painted; the upper deck exterior is currently a pale green with very light grey shaft, and the lower entry wall is a slightly darker shade of grey with bright blue vertical stripes painted at the panel reveals. Without further research, it is not clear whether the paint used at the shaft is original- this may have been unpainted concrete as built. The paint scheme at the lower entry wall is not original and is distracting from the historic intent of the wall, which had a stronger visual tie to the "panelized" construction of the shaft before the blue stripes were added. Again, however, the wall surface may have initially been unpainted concrete. The idea of using the silver and white to highlight the two different sculptural forms seems quite appropriate to the style and period, especially given the association of these shades with "high-tech" materials and finishes. The proposal also would subtly highlight the difference in function between the two arrival/exit points and the vertical transportation shaft of the elevator itself. Expressing the functional components or elements of a structure is one of the tenets of Modern Architecture, so the architectural intent of the style is maintained. Finally, of course, paint is easily altered so there is no true alteration occurring to the historic resource in repainting it.

Lighting Proposal:

- Lower entry wall lighting: The upper portion of the curving entry wall is to be lit in a blue wash of light. The light level proposed appears fairly muted, so the lower three-quarters of the wall would remain only dimly lit, while the upper part with the lettering would glow. The opening to the tunnel would be brightly lit, though, and would appear a bright white against the wall (and especially the polished stone surround). The approach to the wall lighting is appropriate in not creating strong shapes or shadows which might distract from the actual forms of the curving wall and vertical panels. Rather, the visual focus is on the linear upper edge and on the entry itself. Further, no obvious fixture is added to the design; the light fixtures will be visually minimal and unobtrusive. The blue color scheme would tie together the lower entry wall with the upper ceiling linear lights, so even at night there is a correlation between these two entry points.
- Interior observation lighting: The existing blue LED tape will remain, but will receive a new dimmer system to allow the light levels to be adjusted. The ceiling is seen from below and outside at night, and is fairly important in terms of its strong sculptural forms. The existing linear lights successfully highlight these stepping circular forms in the soffit.
- Tunnel lighting: The existing fixtures will remain in the tunnel, but will be re-lamped to correct an overly yellow color. The new lamps will provide a whiter glow from these fixtures. The color is important because it subtly reinforces the clean, modern aesthetic of the Elevator structure and the overall color palette.

Miscellaneous Comments:

- Though the current budget does not include funds to replace the existing tunnel lighting fixtures, replacement may be desired in future if money becomes available. Any new fixtures should have a strong visual connection to the Mid-century Modern style of the elevator.
- Likewise, the promenade site lighting near the upper observatory deck entrance might also be replaced in future if funds become available. The new fixtures and lighting color and level chosen should be historically appropriate to the Municipal Elevator's architectural style.

- In several images, DAO Architects shows alternate benches to the benches that currently exist in front of the lower entry wall. Although PMA understands that bench replacement is not currently part of the proposal, the simple linear seats with no back or arms would indeed be much more in keeping with the stripped, clean lines of the elevator structure than the benches that are there now.
- Miscellaneous signs and graphics such as the “walk your bicycle” sign above the entry could also be reconsidered, and either re-located or perhaps replaced with a sign more in keeping with the Mid-century graphics of the historic plaque and the lower entry letters. While this would require coordination between Public Works, other City Departments, and DAO Architects (or a future consultant), it would improve the historic feel and character of the Elevator.
- Finally, the tunnel floor paint appears to be wearing. Paint is probably not the original finish to this floor; it may have originally been bare concrete. No new surface or change to the existing paint is suggested at this time, but repainting the floor with a similar paint to what exists currently is an ongoing upkeep item that is probably already part of a scheduled maintenance plan.

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