

PORTLAND MALL BUS SHELTER, THE FORMER



Portland, Oregon, USA

Since 1978, this building has stood on the corner of SW 5th Avenue and Salmon Street in Portland, Oregon. It functioned as one of a series of identical bus shelters along the Portland (transit) Mall which was built to help revitalize downtown and encourage public transit. Of the 31 original bus shelters, all but this one were removed following a renovation project in the mid-2000s. It has since become an adaptive reuse project and currently functions as a coffee shop (kiosk) with the support of a Portland business development program.

idea DEV. BUS SHELTER not in use

1955
Portland City Planning Commission Transit Mall Discussions

'72 Downtown Plan Adopted
laying the framework for the transit mall

73 - TriMet (Portland's mass transit agency) Feasibility Study for a Transit Mall

75 - Transit Mall Preliminary Design by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, and Lawrence Halprin and Associates

'76 Construction Begins

Photo Credit: Trimet Archives

'77 Operation Starts
The brick sidewalk was complete with grey outline indicating placement of the bus shelters.

Photo Credit: Trimet Archives

1978
Transit Mall Completed and Formally Opens

Photo Credit: Trimet Archives

1982
The bus shelters are joined by another postmodernist, the Portland Building

Photo Credit: Trimet Archives

2010
Announcement that a local coffee shop will be the vendor/lessee of the bus shelter - '10 Feb

2010
Construction to transform the interior of the bus shelter into a coffee shop begins - '10 Jun

Photo Credit: Dan Carter/DJC

2017
Coffee Viale closes - '17
Bridgetown Caffé - '17

2007
Transit Mall Renovation Begins (beginning removal of original bus shelters)

2009
Transit Mall Renovation Completed - One Bus Shelter left in place (SW 5th Avenue and Salmon St) - '09 May as recommended by Tad Savinar, design consultant for ZGF Architects

Savinar also recommended that the bus shelter be turned into a coffee shop. Support would later come from the Portland Development Commission's Storefront Improvement program.

TriMet Lightrail Max Line introduced within the Transit Mall Corridor - '09 Aug

2009
Proposal filed for the Adaptive Re-use of Original Portland Mall Bus Shelter at SW Salmon Street & 5th Avenue - '09 Aug

2021
Less and More Coffee Shop opens up as new lessee

ADAPTIVE RE-USE [Coffee Shop] remains standing [as a coffee shop]

2023

This project was a collaboration between Portland Mall Management, Inc., Portland Development Commission, TriMet, Hennebery Eddy Architects and Howard S. Wright Constructors.

This research and analysis, which is based on recorded interviews, reports, images, visitations, and interactions, has led to an extensive array of questions, ideas, and wonder about postmodernism, architecture, space, time, and memory. For the purpose of concision, this evaluation is comprised of a compilation of notes pertaining to the subject in question.



"Is this bus shelter postmodern at all?"

This structure essentially has two current identities – one being the lone remaining original Portland (Transit) Mall bus shelter which has been readapted and the other as being a coffee shop, the outcome of the adaptive re-use project. Its reputation as being a former-bus-stop-now-turned-coffee-shop exists in literature about Portland, more so about coffee and less about architecture. And equally as rare is commentary on its original functionality and design as a bus shelter. Altogether, there is no recorded commentary that this building is "postmodern".



Photo Credit: Steve Morgan

Perhaps this question comes up because 12-foot-tall structures may be overshadowed – literally and figuratively – by larger postmodern buildings. If it is postmodern, are its characteristics too modest to appear as moving away from modernism? Perhaps people do not consider this a building at all and see it as just a bus shelter. Are transit systems deemed insignificant for consideration of valuable postmodernism?

Sometimes the impact of artwork, writing, and designs gets unnoticed, forgotten even if noticed for a time, or rejected as being important.

It also reveals that postmodern design (even if just within its urban transit system) had taken root in the city of Portland much earlier than what is commonly thought to be.

The Portland Municipal Services Building (1982), Portland Pioneer Square (1984), and the KOIN Tower (1984) were all built a few years after the opening of the Portland Transit Mall. Unless one considers the Hilton Portland Hotel (built in 1962 and remodeled in 1994 with postmodern elements), this original bus shelter is one of the first postmodern structures in downtown Portland.

It is likely that the bus shelters influenced the design of the above-mentioned structures, either directly or indirectly. The Portland Building and Pioneer Square were built along the transit mall. Pioneer Square incorporates brick elements similar to the sidewalks of the transit mall and its architectural models included the bus shelters. The Portland Building was also built along the mall along 5th Avenue, where, across from it, there were two bus shelters.

While it's difficult to know if Michael Graves (the leading architect of the Portland Building) considered the bus shelters, he did comment in an interview that 5th Avenue was more successful in development because of the transit mall and not because of potential outcomes that could have arisen had Portland become a "glass box city." He also commented on the Orbanco Building (catty-corner to the Portland Building and directly behind the bus shelter as seen in the upper left-hand corner of this poster) not being "an urban building," nor "pedestrian-friendly." [The Orbanco Building was also designed by SOM.]

Over the years, architects associated with postmodernism have expressed disdain for glass box design, critiquing their lack of consideration for their environment. This concern can be considered when analyzing the landscape, function, context, and significance of a postmodern structure. Additionally, if postmodern architecture is what architectural writer, Owen Hopkins, says it is, "underpinned by an attempt to reconnect architecture with the public," then these bus shelters are certainly postmodern. This is because the function of these structures is related to Portland's urban mass transit system and interacts with a mass public including downtown residents, suburbanites, workers, and shoppers from other parts of town. According to a 2004 analysis of the Transit Mall, nearly 90,000 transit riders used its transit stations every weekday. There is no doubt many people over a few decades have interacted with the postmodern motif of the original bus shelters.

This bus shelter exhibits the following postmodern characteristics:

- An example of where form does NOT follow function (ceiling/roof and sector symbols)
- An example of curved lines and classical motif (to be interpreted as something revealing Art Nouveau as stated in the Adaptive Re-use proposal)
- An example of incorporating technology
- An example of playfulness (sector symbols)

The brick flooring in and around the bus shelters greatly contrasts with the pavement along SW 5th and SW 6th Avenues and their intersecting streets. This along with the signage and sector symbols express a more illuminated and colorful aesthetic and function that may have challenged modern thinking in terms of design. The sector symbols included:

- purple rain,
- blue snowflake,
- green leaf,
- red fish,
- yellow rose,
- orange deer,
- brown beaver (sector symbol of the lone remaining bus shelter),

symbolizing the various sectors of bus routes that transported people to and from around Portland Metro.

In a 1979 New York Times article, Paul Goldberger wrote about experiencing the Portland Mall, highlighting the bus shelter as an "impressive" large, enclosed structure and even titling a section of the article as "Bright Colors Used." To quote Goldberger, the new transit mall "does not appear quite real," and is "all a bit too 'designed'."

Overall, this bus shelter expresses a cultural shift by a city that went from experiencing heavy traffic problems in the downtown area, largely due to the massive increase of automobile usage since the 1940s – a by-product of modernism – to a city that encouraged public transportation and prioritized pedestrians.

By the '70s, Portland had also seen a decline in marketplace activity in the downtown area. The bus shelters were a pivotal outcome of the city's Downtown Plan of 1972 which had been devised by city planners, business developers, and residents of the Portland area concerned about the urban and downtown development. Their iconic design and several playful and sentimental elements contributed to the Transit Mall's success in the revitalization of downtown Portland for over 25 years.



The transparent roof resembles an Art Nouveau design. I personally feel it resembles a warped and stretched umbrella canopy. A 1981 impact study described it as being made of glass. However, it is made of acrylic plastic glazing draped over its metal frame. To confirm this, I jumped and reached up with my right arm and hand to determine that it was indeed plastic. Furthermore, no report indicates that the shelters' rooftops ever changed from glass to plastic.

The north and south-facing ends are curved with large window panels and flat railings (originally wood and now plastic) following their curve where one could place a bag or perhaps a cup. The walls along the ends and sides were made of dark bronze. Overall, the black steel frame, dark bronze surfaces, interior small wooden bench seat, and wooden exterior leaning rail may indicate a subtle transition between modern and postmodern architecture.

A closed-circuit television screen hung from the ceiling, displaying arrival times for the next three expected arrival-departure times, and service sector information. This feature would be considered "a first" for urban transit systems.

Along one of the interior walls, there was a payphone and phonebook. You could sit (or stand), watch arrival times, and make a phone call. Such technological installations could be considered postmodern in terms of function, connecting the public with its design elements and ornaments to other places in time (their destination).



Photo Credit: Trimet Archives

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The adaptive re-use of the lone remaining bus shelter is a great start to preserving the significance of the Portland Transit Mall.

Additional methods for preservation could include providing a time and space context in and around the downtown Portland area through signage, and discourse such as architectural, design, and historical walking tours. Having it officially listed as a historic landmark would also help. This may not be difficult considering that it sits adjacent to the six following buildings which are deemed historic-significant resources or historic landmarks:

- Congress Center (formally known as the Orbanco Building)
- 1050 SW Sixth Avenue (Gazebos structure)
- Standard Plaza Building
- The Portland Building
- Multnomah County Court House (recently approved for an adaptive re-use project)
- Standard Insurance Center (formerly known as the Georgia-Pacific Building)



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