

TACOMA

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"If we are to save historic buildings, it's going to take energy and people who care," says Tacoma Historical Society (THS) volunteer Heather Straub (right). Straub and THS Director Mary Bowlby have opened an exhibit about downtown Tacoma's notable historic buildings.

Building History

THS exhibit celebrates downtown Tacoma's architectural icons

Article and Photos By Todd Matthews, Editor

Local history buffs will tell you that downtown Tacoma's oldest buildings are more than bricks and mortar. Some carry the names of the city's earliest civic notables (Bostwick, Rhodes, Rust, and Waddell). Others stand out against the skyline because of their interesting designs (Old City Hall's Italianate clock tower; the National Realty Building's soaring spire; Union Station's classic dome; and Tacoma Municipal Building's Art Deco angles).

One aspect is consistent: these buildings are urban icons.

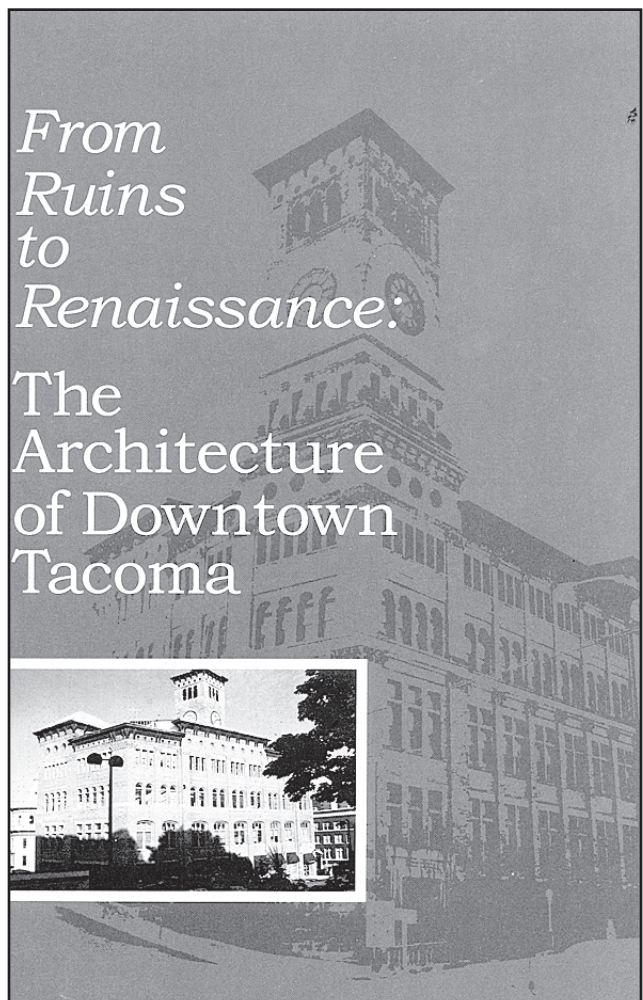
Tacoma Historical Society's current exhibit -- "From Ruins to Renaissance: The Architecture of Downtown Tacoma" -- is proof. It is a unique collection of photographs and artifacts that pay homage to these celebrated buildings.

The exhibit is curated by THS Director Mary Bowlby, and the research and narrative is written by THS member and volunteer Heather Straub. It is largely underwritten by GeoEngineers. Straub, an attorney, is new to Tacoma. She moved here in November 2008 with her husband, and they recently bought a home in Tacoma's North Slope Historic District.

Her first Tacoma experience was not good. Twelve years ago, she worked in the Pierce County Prosecuting Attorney's office and recalled being intimidated by the "empty city."

"I'd take the bus from Seattle and get off on Pacific Avenue," she writes in the program's prologue. "All day I would read police reports about heinous crimes taking place in Tacoma. At night, I'd dread walking down the hill in the deepening gloom, through empty streets echoing with chirps and

tweets from the crosswalk signals for the visually-impaired. I'd look around and think, 'What a pretty city this must have been. What happened to make it so empty?' Now, a walk through those empty streets



reveals new shops, a beautiful UW Tacoma campus, the Museum of Glass and Bridge of Glass, a revitalized theater district, and more people."

Researching downtown Tacoma's historic buildings was one way for her to learn more about the city. And she found Bowlby and THS accessible when it came to writing the story line.

"In Tacoma, there's a greater opportunity for people who are willing to show up, learn, and work hard," she said during an interview last week. "You can get your voice out there. I hope more people consider doing things like this and realize there are opportunities."

The exhibit is divided into five parts:

Forces of Progress: Railroad and Tacoma's Golden Age -- A promising period in Tacoma when notable architects (Frederick Heath, Ambrose Russell, Everett P. Babcock, and August Darmer) designed buildings that left lasting impacts on the city.

Forces of Nature: Both Nurturing and Destructive -- While natural amenities such as Commencement Bay's deep waters for easy portage, trees for the timber industry, and a mild climate drew people and commerce to Tacoma, natural disasters such as fires and earthquakes destroyed many of Tacoma's oldest buildings.

Urban "Renewal" and the Emptying of Downtown -- "I have Urban 'Renewal' in quotes because I think people would argue that's not exactly what was going on," said Straub. "There was a lot of demolition and replacing historic buildings with parking garages. Its reputation faltered and people blew out of the downtown area. It just went from bad to worse."

Decay and Decline: the 1970s and 1980s -- "After suburbanization and other factors emptied Tacoma's downtown core, further alteration and demolition of more historic buildings during the

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CONTINUED early 1970s went mostly unchecked," she writes.
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Renaissance -- Restoration of Union Station and the University of Washington Tacoma led to Tacoma's "re-birth."

A unique aspect of this exhibit is the artifacts collected and displayed. A rusty intercom bell from the Hotel Stoddard. A weathered shoe recovered from the renovation of the Bone-Dry Building. A brittle stair rail spindle from the Luzon Building. Terra cotta ornamentation from the Tacoma Theater.

The exhibit, which opened July 9 and runs through the end of this year, is another fine example of what THS has been doing so well since it opened its small storefront exhibit center, located at 747 Broadway, in December 2005: operating on a small budget, the society mines its membership list to produce excellent shows. In 2007, the society presented more than 100 turn-of-the-century Tacoma postcards amassed by THS member John Graham. Last year, THS member Jim Frederickson shared some of the 30,000 photographs and countless pieces of memorabilia (buttons, stop watches, uniforms, passenger car menus) he collected over four-decades working for Northern Pacific.

The *Index* recently discussed the current exhibit with Bowlby and Straub.

TACOMA DAILY INDEX: How did this exhibit come to be?

MARY BOWLBY: We had an opening event for our Shore Leave exhibit last fall. Heather and her husband came to the event. We chatted. They were new to Tacoma and wanted to learn more about Tacoma. She was interested in volunteering. That was the extent of our conversation. Later on, we went out for coffee. As we talked, she kept talking about how she worked here in the 1990s, when it was really still pretty sketchy. That was before UW Tacoma had really taken off. Her thoughts of Tacoma were of this dark, negative, scary place --- partly from her experience, and partly from the way people in Seattle talked about it. In that context, she was saying she really wanted to learn about Tacoma because she was fascinated by it. She is a lawyer. She is a researcher. She has those strengths and skills. I had this idea in my head and I said, 'I would really like to do this exhibit. Would you be interested in doing the research for it and writing the story-line?'

HEATHER STRAUB: I had studied history in college. I was an English major, but I had a History minor. I was really interested in history. But I've never done a full exhibit. That was my biggest worry. It would be something that I really couldn't do. Mary helped a lot throughout the whole process. That was the really great thing about it. She never gave me an opportunity to give up on it. She gave me a lot of leads in terms of here are some things you might want to look at next. I think between the two of us, things worked out well.

INDEX: How did you go about collecting the artifacts?

STRAUB: The artifacts are all from private collections. Mary sent out an e-mail to people that were on the Tacoma Historical Society board, as well as other architects and history buffs in the area. Different private sources came forward. Most of the artifacts are on loan. None of the artifacts are mine. But I did the research and wrote the story-line, helped Mary pick out which photos we were going to use, and helped look at the artifacts.

INDEX: How did you go about organizing and presenting the information for the exhibit?

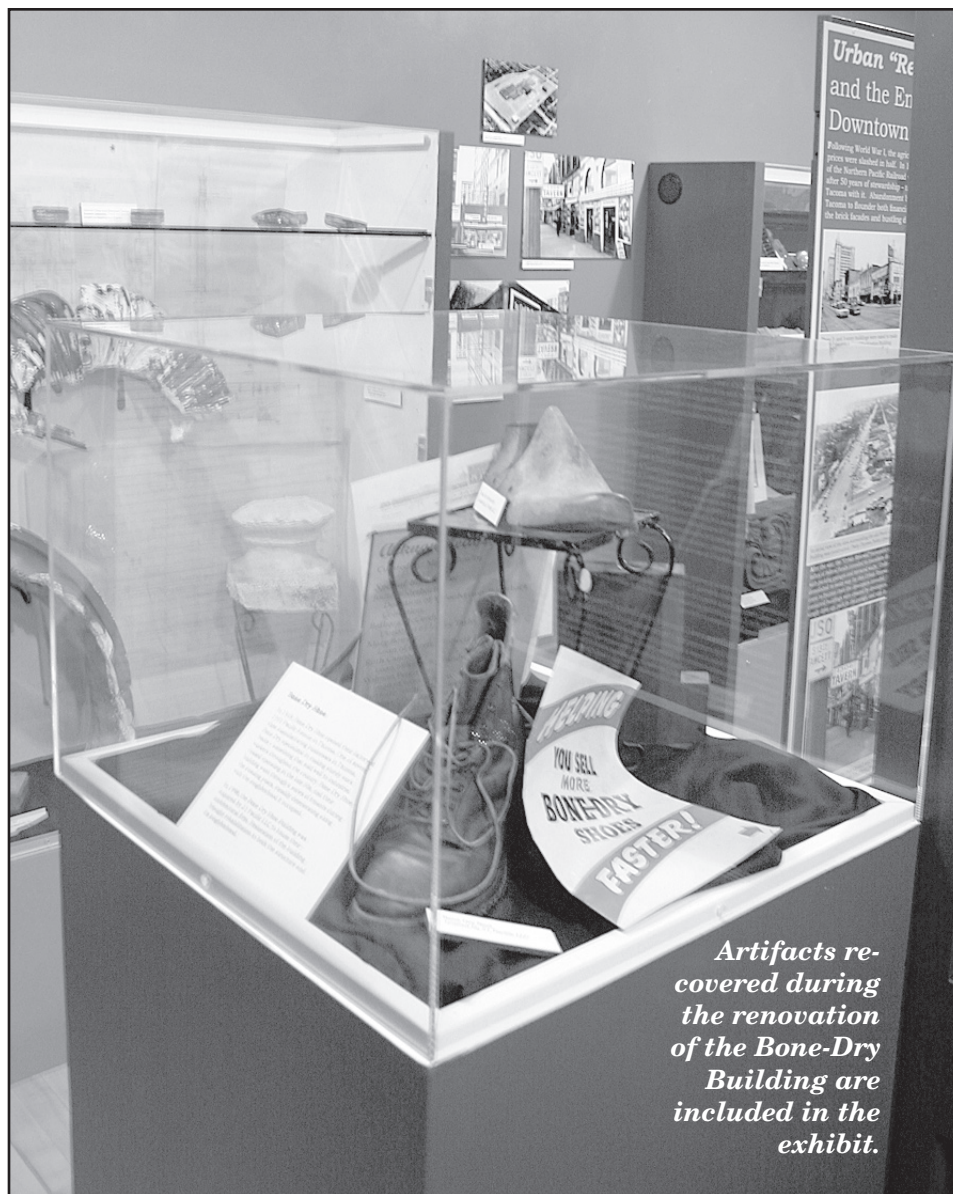
STRAUB: The theme is entropy. If you leave something alone and don't put energy into a city, the natural state of things is to decay and decline. Tacoma is this place where you had a big boom of

story told in various different ways. But I also wanted to include newcomers to the city, or people who never had any exposure to Tacoma architecture. I had to strike a balance between having something new that would appeal to people who already heard the story, and yet telling the basic story of what happened. I hope I did that. I think one thing I did that hasn't been done before is to focus on the renaissance and focus a little on the history of Tacoma's renaissance. I know it's been told in different ways, but not quite like this. Also, I know sometimes when a story is told, it's told from one particular perspective. I actually tried to avoid making judgements about actions being good or bad, or changes to the city being good or bad. Instead, I tried to explain why things happened the way they did. Why developers may have had to raze certain buildings as opposed to preserving them. I really tried to portray the information as neutrally as I could and allow people to make their own judgement about it. And having it be downtown, and with it having such a wide appeal, I'm hoping it will attract visitors who are not normally history buffs or who wouldn't normally go to an exhibit.

INDEX: What is your impression of the downtown's old buildings today? Old City Hall is mostly vacant. Luzon is about ready to fall over. The Elks Building has been the subject of so many development rumors. Are these buildings still going to be here in the future and will they be used?

BOWLBY: I think you have more political influence today than you did 30 years ago. The landmarks commission is much stronger. There are aspects of it that didn't exist. There are laws that didn't exist that now make it possible to get tax credits for historic buildings and things like that. But it's really an economic question. That's the hardest thing. You could probably line up six-dozen people who want the Elks to be saved in terms of city leadership. But who wants to put the bucks in and take a chance on it? Old City Hall was saved. But there it stands as an example of something that nobody has quite figured out how to make work. I think in part it's because -- and this is my personal opinion -- this end of town is kind of empty. You've got some things on the north end of Pacific Avenue that are really beginning to get a little bit more of a buzz down there. But how do you get a critical mass? You got the critical mass down where the university and museums are. The same thing needs to happen up here [in the Theater District and Antique Row]. There was a time when Antique Row was really buzzing in the early-1990s. Antique Row was packed. I think the sentiment is definitely there. The understanding of the importance of historic architecture is there. I just don't know considering the economy.

STRAUB: One thing the exhibit would have to say about it is that if we are to save historic buildings, it's going to take energy and people who care. Possibly even more important than getting involved in a group to save a particular building would be to support downtown Tacoma. Support local business. I think that's the only way to make it economically feasible long-term. Have people renting out offices. Have people supporting local business.



Artifacts recovered during the renovation of the Bone-Dry Building are included in the exhibit.

energy, excited and interested people, money, enthusiasm, and a love of the city pouring in during its early stages. And then throughout its history, it sort of waxed and waned. That's what I was interested in -- what forces contributed to that? Economic forces, natural forces, and different social movements.

INDEX: Downtown Tacoma's architecture gets a lot of attention already. I'm thinking in particular about Old City Hall and the Elks Building. How did you go about telling a story that many people already know?

STRAUB: That was a question that came up. I knew there would be people who would look at the exhibit who already knew more about Tacoma architecture than I did, or who had already heard this