



Pathways

to Portland & Bologna

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To the Supporters of the Portland-Bologna Sister City Association:

It is time to congratulate ourselves and celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Portland Bologna Sister City Association. I am proud to be part of such a vibrant and vital organization, tending so well with our mission of cultural, educational and business exchange laid out years ago.

We are noting our milestone by hosting a visit of a large delegation from beautiful Bologna, representing our civic, civilian and economic ties. Deputy Mayor Matteo Lepore leads our governmental relations group; Lavitabella founder Massimo Antinucci is our “people’s” liaison and three up-and-coming competition-winning start-up entrepreneurs coming will be here to exchange ideas and contacts.

Please attend our Welcoming Dinner at Cyril’s on Thursday night, June 5th at 7pm. This promises to be quite an affair, with great food and wine and plenty of memories and festivities.

There are a number of exciting activities planned from June 5th through June 10th. Please see our website (www.portland-bologna.org) for the schedule of events, all open to the public, most of them free of charge, that include cooking demonstrations, a photography exhibit, an author’s book presentation, Bolognese films, the Rose Festival Parade and more.

This delegation from Bologna is highly anticipated. Massimo received a grant from the European Union that helps him bring a little bit of Bologna in the form of *Casa Bologna* here to us. Bologna’s director of International Relations (since our association’s inception), Francesca Martinese will also make this trip. It will be so nice to be able to spend time with such fans of Portland.

Please attend as many events as you can and we really hope to be able to see you at the big dinner on June 5th.

Ci vediamo!

Phillip Potestio
President, PBSCA

Weekend at Belluschi's

By Brian Libby

“We never could design a building as beautiful as trees.”



Jennings Sutor house (photo by Brian Libby)

That quote from architect Pietro Belluschi is engraved on a commemorative bench in Forest Park dedicated to his memory. Perhaps it's something not many legendary architects would say, yet as this weekend's tour of six Belluschi-designed houses made evident, this was an architect who always saw his designs in the context of landscape.

The Belluschi weekend began Friday night with a talk at the Portland Art Museum given by Belluschi's son, Anthony, an accomplished architect in his own right who spent most of his career in Chicago but also worked with his father on 17 different projects.

Returned to Portland, Anthony now lives in the Pietro Belluschi-designed Burkes house, in which his parents also lived before their passing. The younger architect has restored and expanded the Burkes, which was part of Saturday's tour, but he's also become an active caretaker of his father's legacy. On

the heels of last year's Pietro Belluschi exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society (which is now moving on to the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art in Eugene), Anthony also organized this year's tour in partnership with Restore Oregon.



Papworth house (photo by Paula Watts)

On Friday night, Anthony Belluschi took the packed Whitsell Auditorium on a personal

journey through his father's life and portfolio, beginning with his early days in Ancona, Italy and his service in World War I. As a picture of Pietro in his Italian army uniform showed, he was always a sartorial fellow.

Anthony also showed photos of Bologna, where Pietro studied before the war. "It's important to see where he came from," the son said of the father, pointing out the urban fabric of granite, marble and stone, all materials that would be utilized in his designs.

Pietro Belluschi was part of an enormous diaspora of Europeans who came to America during and after the two world wars. From movie directors to engineers, scientists to novelists, the United States received an incredible infusion of talent resulting from the violent upheavals of the early 20th century. After the war, Pietro studied at Cornell University, which remains perhaps America's most acclaimed architecture school.

Deciding to remain in the US due to the rise of fascism in Italy, he had a choice between Seattle, Portland and San Francisco, but chose our city because of a connection to A.E. Doyle, who was the city's most important and prominent architect (even today only Belluschi himself surpasses Doyle in importance), a stroke of luck not only for Pietro himself, but for our city, in that it created a continuous line of mentorship and mastery that has continued over the decades.

As Belluschi aficionados know, one of the biggest turning points of his career was the Portland Art Museum commission and the fraternal boost from Frank Lloyd Wright that helped make it possible. Museum trustees wanted a neo-Georgian style like that of Doyle's Central Library, rejecting the modern design Pietro created. But after Belluschi wrote Wright asking for help, Wright wrote the trustees and scolded them. The modern design not only won out, but still stands today. "Obviously he went back to the board

and said, 'I told you so,'" Anthony said in his talk.



Equitable building (photo by Brian Libby)

If the Portland Art Museum put Belluschi on the map locally and regionally, the Equitable Building launched him into the national consciousness. The first American skyscraper with an aluminum-clad curtain wall and air conditioning, the Equitable was "right up there with any of the Europeans, the New Yorkers, Mies Van Der Rohe, all of them," said the legendary architect and critic Philip Johnson.

Pietro Belluschi would go on to lead the MIT school of architecture for some 20 years, during which time he designed or co-designed some major American landmarks of modern architecture such as the Pan-Am Building in New York, the Julliard School at Lincoln Center (since altered in a renovation that Anthony said he thinks Pietro would dislike), and the Cathedral of St. Mary in San

Francisco. Of these, it is St. Mary that seems to have the most unique and timeless quality, thanks to elements like its saddle roof, comprised of eight segments of hyperbolic paraboloids, forming a cross.

Although Belluschi had a hand in later Portland buildings such as the US Bancorp Tower, better known as "Big Pink," it was churches and houses that he was known for after returning to the city in 1973 following his MIT retirement. Churches such as St. Thomas Moore in Portland and 1st Presbyterian in Cottage Grove display not just the clean lines of modernism, but an almost arts and crafts-like reverence for materials such as wood.

"I can still see the church of my youth in Bologna, as every church I've been to," Belluschi once told biographer Meredith Clausen. "The church is not the building; it's the coming together of people -- how they face each other, how they feel each other."



Platt residence (photo by Brian Libby). bottom: Ressler house (photo by Drew Nasto).



Ressler house (photo by Drew Nasto)

Talking about Pietro's house designs, of which 34 remain standing, Anthony cited his father's love of barns in the Oregon landscape. "That's something that stuck with him all his life," Anthony said. "They were simple and indigenous."

When I heard Belluschi's masterful circa-1948 Burkes house was being expanded, it made me nervous. Few would ever dream, for instance, of adding on to a Frank Lloyd Wright house. Or if someone tried to expand, say, the John Yeon-designed Watzek House, preservationists would line up to stop it. Why mess with an immaculate piece of local history? I was especially nervous about the fact that a second story was part of the expansion for this one-story home hugging a Northwest Portland hillside.

But having seen it in person, I was relieved that Anthony Belluschi clearly understands his father's architecture well, and the award-winning expansion is such that Burkes house does indeed feel like a congruent whole today, its language of wood and glass not only enlarged but nicely updated for the future with moves such as an expanded kitchen that don't feel out of place in relation to the original design. And for architecture, it's not enough to simply preserve: however artful a design may be, it has to remain relevant and useful.

What's more, as Janet Eastman wrote

in *The Oregonian*, "It is incredibly poignant that Pietro spent his last years here, before passing away at 94 in 1994, and that his son and daughter-in-law refinished wood, replaced worn floors and made modifications that the family, modernists and architecture experts agree would have been approved by the exacting Pietro Belluschi."

Anthony Belluschi expanded what had been a trellis at the edge of the house to create a new multipurpose media room and a loft space in order to accommodate grandchildren. That's where the aforementioned second story comes in, but its sloping roof hugs the original house's form. Between this space and the edge of the original house is a long, thin white-walled and skylight-bathed gallery space between the old and new spaces to display their extensive art collection. Little art can be hung on the walls in the original portion of the house because of its wood ceilings, a kind of artwork of artisanship. The gallery makes a nice visual counterpoint.



Burkes house (photo by Brian Libby)

There were six Pietro-designed houses on Saturday's tour, including the Jennings Sutor (1938), the Joss (1941), the Ressler (1949), the Papworth (1980), and the Platt (1941) in addition to the Burkes (which has been renamed the Belluschi House). Although they

represented a 42-year span of his career, it was noteworthy how much of a connecting thread existed between them. Hallmarks of Belluschi houses noted by Anthony in the talk included sloped roofs with large overhangs or trellises, ample use of wood inside and out, woven wood ceilings, uninterrupted glass walls, louvered vents on exterior walls, cork or wood or tile floors, fireplaces of stone or brick (often with copper hoods), connections to the site and landscaping, functional intimate courtyards, and simple open layouts with easy circulation.

And these features were there to see in each house, whether it was the woven wood ceilings at the Burkes and the Platt, for example, or the sloping roof and overhang of the Sutor and Papworth. What impresses me about these houses is how modest most of them are. These are not mansions for strictly affluent clients. Pietro Belluschi, like Wright before him, sought to bring great design to the masses, as evidenced by his designs for *Life* magazine, for example, or his work for acclaimed California builder Joseph Eichler.



Woven-wood ceiling at the Sutor house (photo by Brian Libby)

The weekend Belluschi-house tour also served as a reminder of how much landscape played a role in the designs. Many of the properties, such as the Platt and the Papworth, are situated amidst extensively landscaped gardens and acreage. Pietro

Belluschi houses aren't monoliths perched in high places for us to look up at. Instead, they seem to become immersed in the land. And while international-style modernism inspired Pietro, so too did Japanese and Scandinavian architecture as well as simple indigenous buildings such as the aforementioned barns. And the amount of wood inside and out further fosters a sense of appropriateness and timelessness.

When Anthony Belluschi finished his talk and opened the discussion to audience questions, one person asked him to talk in greater depth about Pietro as his teacher. After all, Pietro had initially discouraged Anthony from becoming an architect, encouraging him to take up painting. And it couldn't have been easy for a young aspiring architect to match his father's accomplishments. Anthony also eschewed the chance to study at MIT, where his father was dean, and instead studied at the Rhode Island School of Design. Anthony also made his career in Chicago, away from the influence his father had in Portland, Boston or even San Francisco. Yet he also would go on to work on 17 different projects with his father.



Belluschi (formerly Burkes) House (photo by Sally Painter)

Anthony described Pietro as "very subtle, very quiet" as a teacher, but a good one. And in a brief slide show of his own projects, which have been collected in the book *Urban Places, Public Spaces: The Architecture of*

Anthony Belluschi by Edward Gomez, it was clear that father influenced son immensely.

The younger architect designed public spaces such as the soaring American Airlines terminal at Chicago's O'Hare airport, and numerous shopping centers in the US and Asia. Both types of buildings can feel oppressive and claustrophobic in the wrong designers' hands.

Yet as Gomez's book shows, in Anthony Belluschi's hands these spaces are teeming with natural light and materials, transcending the corporate settings they're built to be. It's one thing to design a beautiful art museum, church or house, but it takes a special talent to make a mall uplifting. Belluschi should be proud, both of his own architecture and the role he has taken as caretaker of his father's legacy.

Reprinted from *Portland Architecture* (May 2014) by permission of Brian Libby. For original article, see, <http://chatterbox.typepad.com/portlandarchitecture/2014/05/weekend-at-belluschis.html>