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Sometimes to Wonder

It often seems that human consciousness is divided into periods of work and wonder. Aside from times when we are asleep or completely unconscious, we spend time with our heads down working, producing or driving ourselves. Then by some requirement of nature we unexplainably stop, lift our gaze and simply marvel at the visual or intellectual field before us. The time we spend in wonder is comparably brief and all too often yanked from us by a greedy appetite for clear purpose in what we do. But undeniably it is in those bantam moments of wonder that we find satisfaction, delight and accomplishment.

Blissful little moments of wonder belong in Tacoma these days even while the center of the city looks like downtown Falluja with Berlin as a backdrop. The afterglow of the prestige cultural projects like the Tacoma Art Museum, Museum of Glass, Washington State History Museum and University of Washington Tacoma, is dying in the shade of the prodigious convention center and the chaos of reestablishing Pacific Avenue as a true boulevard. There are massive new constructions underway on the blocks at 15th and Pacific and the floating cranes are sculpting a freshly carved shoreline beneath the city.

There is a sense that a marvelous episode has been created for the city and that for this moment it deserves real wonder. Tacoma is quite a thing right now. Definitely not what it was and not what it will soon be. It's at a point it is quickly moving past and could not possibly stop at. It may also be at the point close to a perfect destination for a physical city of its size and it may not know it.

The montage of urban forms, architectural ideas and social patterns that shape Tacoma right now have a musical tension to them-in tune following a melody but not loud or distorted. There is a balanced harmony of historiographic

buildings, surfaces and patinas blended with ambitious new architectural phrases and the buzz of street builders and newcomers. It is inconvenient for cars and effortless for streetcar riders. As a laboratory for urban design in the Pacific Northwest, Tacoma right now is an experiment at the instant of fomentation. There are however a few ingredients that suggest the beaker may boil over.

The looming \$100 million convention center marks the epicenter of new downtown construction and it embodies the feeling of a physical mass incapable of stopping its motion. In a stepped city, the building is based, cliff like, on a tread one step up from ground floor on Pacific Avenue. It thrusts out of the hillside like an oversized shed dormer window, its roof sprung with a slight arch. Like many convention centers, it's a massive package of standardized, closed interior chambers encased in divided panels of glass, metal siding and unisurface.

In drawings and models, the structure presented a reasonable sense of proportion and setting and even a suggestion of serenity in its meandering fountains and water elements. As land was purchased, old buildings cleared, the thru-line of Broadway blocked, and the site readied however, scant attention was paid to basic judgments of vertical scale, secondary facing elevations and surrounding construction. The result is a better than average design set in an ill fitting physical situation.

As a completed presence, the convention center is now boxed in by a freshly built hotel and commercial structures along Pacific Avenue to the east. Its squared north and south walls offer a long view barrier from both ends of the downtown rather than an interesting visual punctuation. The south wall is particularly harsh in both scale and brutishness. It seals off the Union Station/University district and turns a cold shoulder on one of Tacoma's most cohesive pocket districts. The uphill facing rear of the building is in many ways the most welcoming angle on the structure with a flat overview character to the loading dock area and a clear vista toward Mt. Rainier.

The Greater Tacoma Convention Center has a definite flattering angle that works like an old movie star's best profile. It's from the southeast, looking up the light rail line from Pacific Avenue and the Tacoma Art Museum. From there the tipped out glass front and eyebrow trellis seem to fit into the skyline background created by the Sheraton Hotel, Regents Building and Financial

Center. The building focuses its inner illumination through the lens of its glass facade to light the street stage and streetcar corridor outside the main entry. The hulk of the structure will fade back into the night somewhat and the shallow front wall of the interior exhibition halls will create a recessed plane set back behind the glass like a display window case. It's definitely a neat visual trick that should have a *film noir* quality on rainy nights. The foreground of this perspective is also smartly intended as an open space park and the building and its setting will be well served by both the spatial relief and a very cinematic long shot point of view.

Tacoma's days of wonder are worth watching right now, even in their passage. The city is following a compelling storyline, engaged in a sort of high speed chase that leaves the details blurred and the destination undetermined. It is absorbing to watch, as the design narrative of Tacoma changes dramatically, recalling some of its past, inventing part of its future and pausing a bit longer these days just to wonder.

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