

Place Matters

By Richard H. Engeman

Oregon's history has been deeply affected by its geography and its natural resources. Timber in particular dominated the state's economy, and the industry's products were strewn across the land, from bridge trusses to railroad ties, from barns to mansions. Early Oregonians built structures in styles that were familiar to them and soon Oregonians adapted those styles to use local materials. Improved transportation and communication brought new materials and ideas, which were quickly integrated into Oregon's built environment. The transportation and communication networks that a century ago broadened Oregonians' access to imported building materials and imported ideas now operate on a global scale, and what happens in Oregon can seem mundane or parochial. Some regional distinctions remain, however, and deserve to be studied and encouraged.

Place matters and still makes a difference, especially if that place is the one where we live. Wood production is a sustainable resource, a desirable quality in building material that is not shared by steel or aluminum, and Oregon businesses increasingly promote the concept of sustainability. The idea of local action toward the ideal of sustainability in a global economy has led to the development and implementation of such concepts as "green" buildings, the recovery and reuse of polluted properties, a comprehensive land-use planning policy that incorporates consideration for history and historic preservation, stream rehabilitation and streamside restoration, beach and wetlands protection, organic farming and farmers' markets. Even Oregon supermarket chains, furniture builders, and residential contractors are beginning to endorse and work toward sustainability ideals.

Oregon is still a state that can be characterized by its forests and its trees, by wood and wood products. Lumber mills and wood-frame houses still dot the landscape, if not so pervasively as they once did, despite having to share the land with shopping malls and freeways. If we look at the Oregon landscape and read the clues in its building and structures, study the historical photographs and maps and plans that depict what once was on the land, the Oregon story is more distinct and Oregon history more vivid.

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