

Out of the ashes: An evolving streetscape

By Jaime Lump For The Astorian Sep 22, 2023



At 2:30 am on December 8th, 1922, smoke began seeping from the floor of Thiel Brothers billiard hall in the Cook Building on Commercial Street. “Headquarters firemen ran their line to the pool hall, raised the trap door. The basement was a furnace of roaring flames blowing helmets off the heads of the firemen. There was no time nor opportunity to investigate around what started the fire.” (Walter Matilla, Astoria-Budget, 1947)

To this day, the origin of the fire remains a mystery. Initial smoke was simultaneously seen at Thiel Brothers and at the non-adjacent Bee Hive Department store two doors down. Before long it was jumping across the street and engulfing nearly every building in its path. The fire,

however it started, began in the center of downtown on Commercial just west of 12th street and spread evenly in all directions.

But even before the fire in 1922, downtown Astoria had already evolved out of multiple iterations of itself. Astoria was growing, simultaneously driven by an independent spirit and influenced by the many visitors and new residents that came from bigger cities all across the country.

Downtown Astoria had already evolved out of multiple iterations of itself. During the second half of the 19th century, the city's business district developed over the southern tide flats of the Columbia River. As technology and resources improved, Astoria eventually built a seawall along the river, harnessing the banks that once lapped against Exchange street. With these infrastructural changes, the downtown buildings were raised up, allowing for the installation of proper basements that were connected by a viaduct system. At that point in time, cities across America were beginning to modernize through the use of concrete to build fireproof structures. This was especially apparent in cities that experienced fire-related disasters, like Seattle and Chicago. Despite the trend, Astoria remained hesitant to implement any building material other than the convenient and locally sourced timber from the surrounding forests.

The Cook Building was no exception. In 1897, Archie Cook, who owned Pacific Grocery Co. on 12th street, saw an investment opportunity in a one-story, somewhat dilapidated structure around the corner on Commercial just west of 12th. After purchasing the little building, he repaired it, remodeled it, and rented it out to various tenants including a tailor and a jeweler. But the Cooks didn't remain in Astoria for long. Employment prospects unfolded before Archie in the big city. After he had found work as a travel agent with a prominent company, he moved his wife and children down to Portland where they purchased a big house with fireplaces and room to grow a flower garden. In 1906, before Archie had a chance to enjoy the new home he died from complications of appendicitis. He was only 34. His daughter died the same way only a

few years later. Archie's widow, Katie, was left with no choice but to continue on with life and raise her two sons by herself. The Cook Building remained an asset to the family and Katie resolved to continue managing it remotely from their home in Portland. Imperial Oyster and Chop House had been leasing the main storefront and remodeling multiple times over the years to keep up with modern conveniences. By 1919, the restaurant had been completely transformed into a billiard hall and two years later, Thiel Brothers had claimed the space for their business.

After the embers from the great fire began to cool and Astorians were planning to rebuild, Katie Cook decided to come up to Astoria to see the damage of her building with her own eyes. In her words, "...there was nothing left but ashes," Like many Astorians, Katie remained undefeated, deciding to have a new one-story building constructed as a memorial and monument to her late husband, complete with his name across the top of the parapet: 19 Cook 23.



The new Cook Building was elaborated with a decorative brick veneer, a prominent cornice fashioned with ornamental brackets, and three bays of storefronts with recessed entries. Three businesses set up shop right away in the new building: May Calloway's Millinery, Mark Siddall's Sporting

Goods, and a restaurant called the Lobby Lunch. A cigar shop occupied a small retail space on the eastern side of the building. Unfortunately, it

was only a few years later that the Great Depression turned several businesses over, and the Cook Building ended up sitting vacant for a number of years.



While the Great Depression dramatically changed America's economy, it also had a strong influence on American architecture. Before the stock market crash, 1920s architecture across the country was moving toward the opulence of Art Deco - but post-Depression, opulence was seen as somewhat

of a frivolous thing. Modernization in an industrial world paired with the pragmatic mindset of the 1930s created an architectural style called Streamline Moderne, identified by the emphasis on horizontal lines, curves, and the use of glass blocks. Because of the fire and the subsequent haste and expenses to rebuild in the early 1920s, Astoria did not naturally evolve into the use of Art Deco, but the post-fire, post-Depression buildings began to implement the elements of Streamline Moderne. In 1932, the Liberty Grill moved from Duane street to the Cook Building on Commercial. Owners Lucas and Marino Franetovich invested \$20,000 into remodeling and modernizing the building with the very in-fashion Streamline Moderne style elements. The two recessed entries in the western bays were rebuilt with curved corners and rounded windows with glass blocks. Metal multi-light windows, also popular with the style, replaced the transoms over the bays. Neon lights and signage wrapped the rounded canopy above the vestibule entrance. For nearly three decades, Liberty Grill operated as one of Astoria's most

popular dining establishments, but after multiple shifts in ownership, the restaurant closed in 1959.

In the meantime, architecture continued to evolve in American cities.



Mid-Century Modern and International styles won the hearts of American architects - the emphasis on simplicity and smooth clean lines replaced any heavy use of decoration. Commercial spaces, especially those used for retail, implemented non-reflective glass as a way to blend the barrier between the sidewalk and the shopping space.

Transparency translated to honesty. When Ful-Mon 88 Cent Store moved into the Cook Building in 1960, the facade was once again overhauled to reflect the evolution of the ever-changing American streetscape. The cornice and brackets were removed, all of the brick veneer had been replaced with a stucco surface, and the rounded entries were exchanged with large glass display windows to tap into the consumer needs.

The Cook Building went through one last major renovation in 1978 with the installation of arched windows and doorways surrounded by a dark brick veneer. A notable shift was happening in facade style during the late 1970s with a nationwide interest in returning to earthy colors, dark tones, and organic materials as a sort of reclamation of nature.

It's not obvious to passersby that the site of the pre-fire Cook Building was the epicenter of the great fire disaster - no interpretive sign or

marker holds the building responsible for that story. The post-fire Cook Building facade has become somewhat unrecognizable from its initial 1923 iteration, but historic photos and records of its tenants tell a greater story of downtown Astoria's history. Several downtown Astoria facades have changed over the last one hundred years, whether adapting to changes in their purposes, following trends in aesthetics, or simply attempting to wrap the structure in a material that protects its original features from the harsh environmental elements. The mid-century styles and materials denote that though Astoria has retained a historic streetscape, it still evolved through the various periods of architectural modernization - a small coastal town working to keep up with the big cities across the country while still keeping true to its identity. When we learn to 'read' building facades, we begin to notice the ways in which our built environment has changed over time, enabling us to interpret the history of the buildings and their evolution, and think about all the people intertwined with that history.

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2023 Cook Bldg Jaime Lump

1923 Cook Bldg: photo year, 1923 photo credit, Sara's Old Photos

Liberty Tavern and Grill: photo year, 1950s photo credit, Clatsop County Historical Society

1960 88 cent store: photo year, 1960 photo credit, Sara's Old Photos