

DONOVAN (DON) CLARK BYERS & UNIVERSAL PLAN SERVICE

by Michael Craig Houser

Architect Don Byers may have been one of the most prolific architects in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. To date there are at least 112 known buildings designed by his hand in the Portland area. And between 1948 and 1951 he designed over 2,500 housing units, mainly in the form of garden court apartments and residential apartment towers. His work includes shopping malls, restaurants, hospitals, churches, office buildings, banks, and countless single-family residences.



Don Byers architect, c. 1953

Don Byers' work includes some of the tallest buildings in the state of Oregon at the time of their construction. Among them, is the \$4.5 million, 24-story Panorama Apartments. At 224 feet high, the building was Portland's tallest apartment complex when it opened in 1964 and the second tallest building in the state of Oregon, subordinate only to

the Portland Hilton Hotel. Byers work has been featured in national and regional magazines for his innovative use of materials and unusual construction techniques. St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, built in 1957, was featured in Architect and Engineer magazine in December of 1958, for its use of parabolic arches, which highlighted a glass end curtain wall. The church was also featured in numerous advertisements for its innovative use of the Pella Company's new folding door system. Yet despite Byers' impact on the built environment particularly in the Portland area, he is almost unknown by preservationists, scholars, and architectural historians.

Born Donovan Clark Byers on April 28th, 1912, Byers grew up in Alvadore, a small town about 10 miles outside of Eugene, Oregon. After attending grammar school in Portland, the Byers family moved back to Alvadore, where at Eugene High School Don took a liking to mechanical drawing and decided to become an architect.

After high school Byers enrolled at the University of Oregon majoring in architecture. He studied under Ellis Lawrence, the Dean of the School of Art and Architecture, and William Wilcox, the Architecture Department Head. This was at the time when Lawrence and Wilcox were scrapping the traditional Beaux Arts curriculum and replacing it with an innovative program based on the philosophies of Frank Lloyd Wright, the Bauhaus design school and a movement

towards regionalism. The teachings of Lawrence and Wilcox helped the young designer balance these divergent approaches to architecture, and in later years would enable him to apply a broad stylistic vocabulary to a diverse set of building types and needs.

Byers' projects during school proved him to be a talented student and for a time he considered changing his major to sculpture. However, before he graduated the realities of the Depression caught up with him and he left school in 1934, one year shy of his degree, to make ends meet. After leaving school, Byers eventually wound up in Portland working as a draftsman for architect, Howard Gifford, and building designer, Harry Boland. At the time the two were operating Universal Plan Service, one of Portland's larger residential architectural firms.

At the time Byers joined the firm, Boland and Gifford were busy carrying out their vision to make it possible for people with limited means to build an individually designed home for a very low architectural fee. In order to do this, they assembled a large number of stock plans, publishing their first plan book in 1926. Copies of the plan book sold from 75 cents to \$1.00 each. Orders for Universal Plan Service's books came from all parts of the United States during the building boom of the 1920s. And when the Depression struck the construction industry in the 1930s, Universal Plan Service continued to do well. Now more than ever builders were

anxious to cut every corner in their expenses. One popular book in the late 1930s went into its 5th reprint, selling a total of 50,000 copies. The 1930s also

saw the expansion of the business to international markets as orders for plans began to come in from foreign countries all over the globe; from places as far away as Turkey, the British Isles, South Africa, and South and Central America.

By 1940, six years after Byers had arrived at the firm, Universal Plan Service had sold 158,000 plan books. And by 1950, Universal Plan Service had sold nearly 500,000 plan books. Estimates show that in Portland, Oregon alone, the firm sold plans for nearly 10,000 homes. Their last plan book was published in 1960.



*Advertisement for Universal Plan Service.
Portland Home Builders, June 1953.*

Byers' career at Universal Plan Service was on the fast track almost from the time he joined the firm. Recognizing the talents and skills that Byers had acquired in his short time at school, in 1937, Byers was promoted to chief draftsman. And by 1945, at the young age of 33, he became a full partner.

While the firm continued to produce single family residential plan books,

under Byers' management and guidance, they began to receive larger commissions. During the 1930s and 1940s, the firm began to dabble in the Streamline Moderne style. Their best example is the 1946 Phillips Electronic Building on 11th and Flanders in Portland, Oregon.

In 1946, longtime business partner Howard Gifford passed away, and with no registered architect in the office, Byers took the Oregon State Board of Architect examiners test. After that, he continued to be a partner with Universal Plan Service, but in addition, opened his own architectural firm, Don Byers Architect. It is still somewhat unclear whether some of the buildings associated with Byers were designed under the name Universal Plan Service or Don Byers Architect. But we do know that by 1948, Byers had become the head designer for Universal Plan Service and was most likely responsible for most of their designs. By 1950, it was estimated that the value of the housing projects that Byers had personally designed was between \$25 and \$50 million.

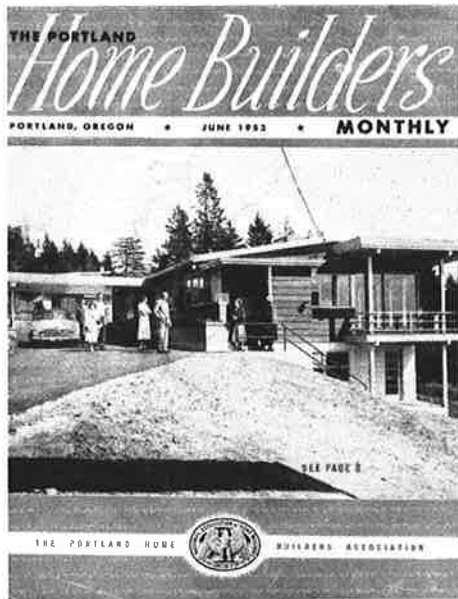
The popularity of the Universal Plan Service's plan books, now mainly under Byers control, afforded him many invitations to interact with the public regarding his professional opinion on good residential design and construction techniques. He spoke numerous times for the Eugene, Longview-Kelso, and Portland chapters of the Home Planners Institute. During his lectures he often warned contractors against unnecessarily cutting all the trees from lots, and advised homeowners to "plan their

homes to fit the site with rooms facing the proper direction for adequate views and sunlight".

In the mid 1950s, Byers was asked to develop a series of "Home-of-the-Weeks" for the Oregon Journal's NW Living section. He had previously been afforded a two-page article describing a design he developed in 1953 called the "Trade Secret House". The home was modeled after the "Trade Secret Home" featured in Life magazine a few months before. Byers' design had adapted the initial plan to meet local conditions in the Northwest. Priced at \$15,000, the 1,342 sq. ft. home was eventually built by the Portland Home Builders Association at its yearly show. After the show, the home was reportedly cut in half, moved to a new site and then sold. Its current location is unknown.

Byers seemed to have a talent for model homes, or at least a solid connection with the Portland Home Builders Association. His affiliation to the Association may have started in 1948 when he acted as supervising architect for "Mr. Blandings Dream House". The house was a promotional venture to announce the release of the movie "Mr. Blandings Dream House" starring Cary Grant and Mryna Loy. Located on Walker Road, just outside of Portland, the home showcased the latest in construction materials and featured over \$30,000 worth of Meier & Frank furnishings. Byers went on to design the Association's 1950 Mid-Century model home, (location unknown) and its 1953 General Electric Model Home.

Located in the west hills of Portland at 3520 Bridlemile Lane, the General Electric Model Home was reportedly “perfect and complete to the last detail” and was “excellently planned for a



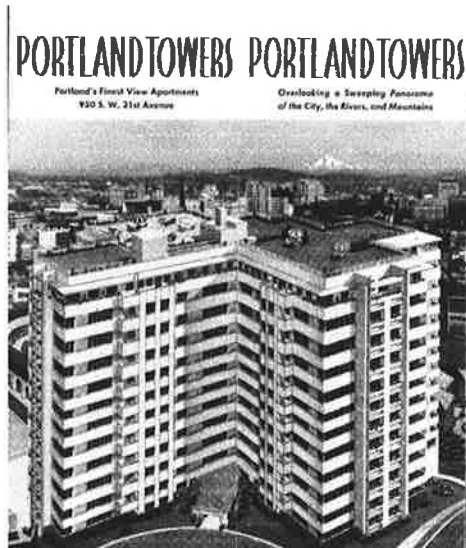
June 1953 Issue of Portland Home Builders

maximum expression of living enjoyment in the great northwest.” The Oregon Journal called the house, the “home of electrical ideas” and “a home of delightful surprises”. Byers’ plan utilized a wide porte-cochere and circular entrance driveway. Roman brick planters, glass blocks, and fluted glass sidelights greeted the homeowner as he or she entered the house. Off the entry vestibule was a large 19’ x 38’ living / dining room combination, which featured an unusual drum-type brick fireplace with a built-in planter. Of course in the kitchen, General Electric had supplied all of its latest appliances. Over 15,000 people toured the four-bedroom home in just a few days. The house was eventually sold for \$40,000, and is still owned today by relatives of the original purchasers of the house, Earl and Virginia Rowe.

Byers and Universal Plan Service experienced a huge increase of business in the 1940s. Wartime mobilization had transformed the Portland area into a shipbuilding center, and its population swelled by a staggering 23 % over ten years, from 305,000 in 1940 to almost 374,000 in 1950. Workers from all over the country poured into the city to man the shipyards, which between 1940 and 1944 produced more than a thousand oceangoing vessels. Housing tracts and apartment complexes sprang up almost overnight to shelter the influx. It was during this time that Byers and Universal Plan Service reportedly designed about 1/3 of all the single family residential housing units in the Portland area. And between 1948 and 1951, Byers had designed some 608 apartment projects scattered throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Byers’ apartment designs fall into two categories: *garden court apartments* and *tower or corridor apartments*. His garden court apartment designs allowed each apartment its own outside entrance off a wide and often highly landscaped courtyard; all planned for the maximum of privacy of each unit. They were generally built outside the city core in the sprawling suburbs and frequently on corner lots. His designs usually incorporated a brick veneered first floor, which highlighted a second story covered in horizontal clapboard. Almost all of Byers’ garden court apartments utilized a hip or gable-on-hip roof design. A distinguishing characteristic of many of his designs was the use of basement garages, which gave his garden apartments a raised entry court yard. On the garage door side, concrete abutments and trusses supported a balcony for the apartments above.

Byers' *tower or corridor apartments* all have their entrances from a central corridor which is reached from either a front door to the building, a stairway or by elevators. His tower apartments are



Promotional brochure for the Portland Towers.

located in mainly high-density areas of downtown Portland, although he did provide tower apartment designs for Medford, Corvallis, Eugene, Salem, and even Anchorage, Alaska. Modern high-speed elevators served all of his tower apartments. Many of the tower designs provided their own parking in a multi-level garage adjacent to the main apartment structure or under the tower so that the urban dweller need never go outside to reach the car, successfully avoiding the constantly drizzly northwest weather. His tower apartments show a distinct geometric pattern with building footprints of an "X" or "+". While the banding of multiple groups of windows without mullions gave the structures a horizontal, almost international style flavor; they are broken by articulated end walls which had a strong vertical component. Another favorite design element of Byers was the use of the uninterrupted

corner window, which gave each apartment dweller an unobstructed view of the city. His whimsical play of curving or round elements at the entryways of each geometric tower softened the harsh realities of the poured concrete and concrete block designs.

With the increase in population and rise in the use of the automobile during Byers' design career, downtown Portland had become clogged with automobiles. New front facing garage-centered residences sprouted up like variable weed patches in the surrounding suburban areas. As a result, drive-in restaurants and auto-oriented shopping centers were developed from the imaginations of such modernists as Byers. Among his projects were the 1958 Menlo Park Shopping Plaza in Portland, Oregon, the 1961 Rockwood Plaza Shopping Center, and several nondescript auto-related office buildings. In one of the more innovative plans of the day, Byers created a visionary concept in 1956 to turn a seventy-two-block area in downtown Portland, Oregon into an outdoor shopping center. Ahead of his time, Byers' design concept surrounded the area by a high-speed one-way beltway and left the interior streets open only to pedestrians. His new metropolitan shopping center was designed to elevate traffic congestion by building numerous parking garages and underground tunnels to access the interior buildings, all the while leaving the "garden type" shopping center with open-air courts and sidewalk cafes. The cost for the project was estimated at one billion dollars.

His similarly designed proposal for Portland's China Town was based on the concept of blocking off the streets to

traffic and giving the pedestrian priority over the automobile. The Portland Housing Authority authorized the study in 1961 and its primary purpose was to provide low income housing for elderly Chinese. Byers' design showed a one-block by three-block area, and had space for a classical Chinese garden, a relocated Buddhist temple and areas for underground parking. Pedestrian bridges over the streets connected banks, retail areas and restaurants.

Despite Byers phenomenal success, he did have a few controversial projects. Among them was the 1951 Capitol Plaza, in Salem, Oregon. Byers had designed for his clients a seven-story, 36-unit apartment complex just four blocks north of the Capitol building on the proposed mall. While the city had issued the building permit, the Capitol Planning Commission, led by Bend Bulletin publisher Robert Sawyer, wanted the area reserved for Capitol expansion, not private investment. A heated feud followed, and the Portland Chapter of the AIA took sides against Byers' project. After lively debate, Capitol Plaza was constructed three blocks off the Capitol mall.

Another controversial project was the 1963 Northwest Tower Apartments. Built by the Portland Housing Authority, the 180-unit apartment complex utilized a combination of poured concrete and aluminum curtain exterior walls. When originally constructed, the 13-story building boasted bright yellow exterior walls. The color drew bitter comments from none other than the Portland Chapter of the AIA. They called the paint "garish and gaudy" and noted that it was wreaking "aesthetic havoc on the neighboring community". Many

editorials in the local newspaper, The Oregonian followed. Some favored the color, others thought it should be repainted at once, which eventually it was.



1960-1961 Northwest Tower project.

Such run-ins with the Portland Chapter of the AIA led Byers to never become a member of the organization, but instead he held a lifetime membership with the alternative Society of Registered Architects.

After almost five decades of design work, Byers officially retired and closed his office in the early 1980s. At the time of his retirement he held licenses in seven states including Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, Montana, Hawaii and Alaska.

In 1989, Byers was fatally struck by a car while attempting to cross McLoughlin Boulevard in Portland, Oregon. While his building designs may not live up to the stature of such Pacific Northwest architectural giants as Pietro Belluschi, Van Evera Bailey, or Richard Sundeleaf, Byers' work should be appreciated for its significant impact on Portland's urban landscape. His buildings convey an important message relative to their time and place in history. And unlike Belluschi and Bailey, Byers created an unusually high number of structures that directly impacted the day-to-day lives of

the middle class, suburban and urban dweller. His presence can be found in the built environment in countless cities throughout the nation and maybe even throughout the globe and should make

Byers one of the more notable architects of his time.

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