

ARTS WALK &  
THE PROCESSION OF THE SPECIES  
Saturday, April 21, 2001  
Twilight  
Olympia, Washington: An All America City



*"But then, downtown is special, isn't it?  
It keeps a city healthy the way a beating heart keeps a body healthy.  
It speaks to who lives in this city the way your own living room speaks to who lives in  
your house-it's the first room the guests see, the one you decorate and clean and arrange  
to say something about you."*

The Olympian Mar 17, 2002

Now that the long winter is over, Olympia has put out the welcome mat, inviting everyone to come downtown and celebrate two South Sound originals: The Procession of the Species and Arts Walk. It is a day of transformation and boundless creativity in the Capital City. Business folks shed their work attire, becoming butterflies or salmon, eagles or elephants, and entire classes of students might turn into flocks of shorebirds or rain forest tree frogs. The natural world is being honored today, in all its forms, sounds, colors and movements. Twenty thousand people have gathered and are soon swaying to the samba music, while young ones perch atop their parent's shoulders for a better view. Batik banners, reflecting the elements of earth, fire, wind and water, bob up and down to drums and cymbals, horns and flutes. Guided for the past seven years by the imagination and hard work of Earthbound Productions and Eli Sterling, the procession has become the largest Earth Day celebration in the Northwest. With 2,500 participants, it is undoubtedly the largest gathering of antlers, beaks, feathers, fur, flowers, leaves, scales and tails that ever filled the streets of Olympia.

When the parade of the natural environment comes to an end, the built environment becomes the host, as downtown buildings open their doors to showcase the talents of local artists for Arts Walk. Citizens strolling from one makeshift studio to another might be serenaded by jazz or chamber music as they mingle in the crowds, bumping into friends and neighbors. Arts Walk is Olympia's twice-yearly invitation to marvel at the creations of South Sound's thriving art community, where every medium from watercolor paintings to metal sculptures, and every style from abstract to impressionist is represented. On this day, Arts Walk is in its 26th year, and has become a favorite local tradition.

Since the snow scene of 1972, the forces of nature have again changed the course of daily life for South Sound citizens. On February 28, the Nisqually earthquake, registering 6.8, shook foundations and jangled nerves but fortunately caused no loss of life. However the tremor signaled the end for the concrete 4th Avenue bridge which had connected Olympia to the Westside for eight decades. New bridge designs are underway, and construction just began on a temporary span to handle the traffic. However congestion has been worsened by the fact that the Deschutes Parkway buckled during the quake and has also been closed. When the permanent bridge is finished three years from now, it will represent the largest public works project in Olympia's history. The Yashiro Friendship Bridge will be functional *and* artistic, offering pedestrians mosaic viewing decks by day, and dramatic lighting by night.

As in the past, downtown merchants must repair the damage from the earthquake and try to reopen for business. This is often a complex process, especially if the building is 100 years old. Drees is currently having a retrofit sale, the old capitol entry is fenced off for repairs, and the decorative terra cotta trim of the columned bank on Capital Way is gone, replaced by a blue tarp for now. Shanna Stevenson, one of Olympia's foremost historians, is compiling a list of damages to all downtown historic structures. She has stopped to speak with former Secretary of State Ralph Munro about the archeological dig at his farm on Mud Bay.

Crossing Washington Street is former Olympia mayor Holly Gadbaw, out for a Saturday jog. Holly was a city council member in 1984 when Olympia hosted the first ever U. S. Women's Olympic Marathon trials which drew 50,000 spectators. This national sports event was organized and funded mostly by South Sound volunteers.

Volunteering has been a way of life for a number of people in Sylvester Park today. Standing in the gazebo that POSSCA\* dedicated 25 years ago is civic leader Barb O'Neill. She is talking with Jan Putnam who shares her dedication to programs that feed the hungry. Steve Charak is more intrigued with feeding the mind. He runs Young Voices Magazine for budding student writers. Then there are those who feed the senses, like Art Zabel who will soon open his rhododendron garden to the public again.

Besides the gazebo, which hosts music events each summer, citizens have made other improvements to Sylvester Park. At night, charming new streetlamps that harken back to an earlier era light your way. The Emma Page drinking fountain (for people and dogs) was rededicated last July. A few years earlier, vandals had damaged the base, and thrown the marble bowls onto Capitol Way. But preservationists and Emma's descendents

repaired the fountain, and once again, thirsty park goers and their pets have a place to get a drink of water.

Curving around Capitol Lake, the massive Heritage Park project continues to take shape, connecting the Capitol Campus to the isthmus below . An interactive fountain was dedicated there five years ago, inviting children on hot summer days to cool off and dodge the spray.

Though there is no passenger train in downtown Olympia, citizens can now drive to an attractive new Amtrak Station on the Yelm Highway. Outdoor enthusiasts and project leaders have been turning old abandoned railroad beds into urban trails such as the popular north-south Chehalis Western Trail, and the planned east-west Woodland Trail which will someday take walkers and bikers from Tumwater Historical Park to Lacey.

Since the last scene, the city worked to turn the waterfront back into a welcoming place again. The old warehouses are gone and in their place, scenic Percival Landing stands, an extensive public boardwalk lined with restaurants and shops, planters and benches. It invites you to admire the vistas of the mountains and the water, or study pictures of early-day steamboats and oyster canneries displayed on interpretive kiosks.

Not far from the boardwalk, the signature blue windows of the Olympia Center rise up on Columbia Street. This community meeting place which was built 14 years ago, also houses an expanded Senior Center.

Farther out on the port fill, dramatic changes have occurred. At the north end of Capitol Way stands Olympia's Farmer's Market, which bills itself as the largest locally grown farmer's market on the West Coast. (While Seattle's Public Market sells some non-local produce, *everything* at Olympia's market is grown within a four county radius.) You can now walk from the market to waterfront restaurants, a new motel, a new apartment complex and several large office buildings. The Swantown Marina and Boatworks are in place on the east channel, and nearby, the sewage treatment plant has undergone extensive upgrades. At the end of the peninsula, citizens have been cleaning up the old wood preserving site, and to the west, the Port Plaza is shaping up as a new destination for outdoor events. The log yards still exist, but are now dwarfed by two huge Gantry cranes for lifting cargo, and a massive port warehouse. The smell of the new coffee roasting plant is decidedly different than the oil fumes and sawdust smell of industries from days gone by.

A stroll from the port up Washington Street will take you past two new additions which fill important needs in the community. First is the new transit center on State Avenue where Intercity Transit's fleet of busses can now pick up and drop off passengers in a centrally located

modern structure with generous covered waiting areas. For more than a decade now, Intercity Transit has offered even greater customer service through its Dial-a-Lift and Vanpool programs.

Further up Washington Street is the Washington Center For The Performing Arts which has hosted big name entertainment and local cultural events for more than fifteen years. The modern four story structure houses 1,001 seats. As a tribute to the past, citizens moved the picturesque World War I clock from Kluh's Jewelers to the center's entrance and left some of the palladian windows from the old Liberty Theater. Just as the 1,000 seat Olympia Opera House drew crowds downtown in 1899, citizens again have a grand downtown performing arts destination, filling the streets and restaurants with theater goers all year around. Today, places like the Washington Center, Percival Landing, the Farmer's Market, and new specialty shops in historic buildings offer something that is unique to downtown and not found at the surrounding malls or "big box" chain stores.

Two organizations committed to keeping Downtown Olympia unique and interesting are the Arts Commission and the Heritage Commission, both formed in the 1980s. Thanks to citizens working for the arts, there are statues, fountains, paintings, murals and sculptures around town where once there was only the John Rogers statue in the park. The 1998 "Triumph of the Vegetables" and the 1996 "Tide Pool of Time" are recent artistic additions found nowhere else but in Olympia. Thanks to citizens working for historic preservation, Olympia has over 200 markers on historic buildings, and interpretive signs at historic sites. Downtown history walking tours are offered, and there are hopes that the restored 1909 Sand Man tug boat may be available for harbor tours some day soon.

Today, in 2001, the historic Bigelow House is still occupied by the pioneer's grandson Daniel and his wife Mary Ann Bigelow. Through their efforts and the work of dedicated volunteers, the Bigelow House has been restored and turned into a museum, giving citizens a valuable glimpse into one of the oldest homes in the entire Pacific Northwest.

Twenty years ago Tumwater established the Henderson House Museum on the historic ground of the original pioneer village. Volunteer historians like Jim Brown keep the stories of this first South Sound community alive. It was also in 1981 that Lacey opened its museum in the Lacey historic district. The State Capital Museum continues to interpret state and government history.

The area east of downtown Olympia on Fourth and State has been changed dramatically by the opening of the auto mall in 1985 on the

Westside. Blocks that used to house car dealerships and auto parts businesses have now been transformed into restaurants, shops and an office for the Kids at Play Children's Theater program, which has been showcasing local young talent since 1986.

South of downtown, the Hands On Children's Museum is doubling its size and opening new exhibits. Next year, museum staff will welcome 100,000 visitors to this imaginative destination for the younger set.

The bowling alleys, skating rink, and first-run movie theaters which once operated downtown, are now located on the outskirts of the city. Today the Capitol Theater shows independent and international films sponsored by the Olympia Film Society, while the recently renovated State Theater now hosts the popular performances of Harlequin Productions.

Since 1972, Olympia and Tumwater have doubled their populations, with Olympia at 42,530 and Tumwater at 12,770. Meanwhile residents of Lacey have tripled, jumping to 31,600. Olympia replaced its commission with a council form of government, and Stan Biles serves as mayor today. Washington's governor, Gary Locke, enjoys this evening's events with his family, and nearby stands Judge Gerry Alexander, who was recently appointed chief justice of the state Supreme Court. Back in Washington, D.C. the person now occupying the White House is George W. Bush.

In 1986 the National Civic League named Olympia an "All America City" for its community pride, collaboration and economic stimulus. Today citizens are hoping to keep that sense of pride alive downtown. They are looking for ways to make Olympia an 18 hour city where the streets are busy each evening and where people feel welcome and safe. They hope to ease parking problems, avoid empty storefronts, and meet the needs of citizens seeking jobs, downtown housing, social services, leisure activities or transportation. They want to maintain past projects and brainstorm new ones. City leaders are looking for a new City Hall site, and discussing plans for an arts and conference center. Others are trying to decide the best future for Capitol Lake which is still a scenic reflecting pool, but closed to swimming now due to pollution. Citizens are meeting and planning and sharing their ideas as they have always done.

Since the days when the first canoes plied these waters, people have dreamed of how to shape this place into the kind of home they wanted. The built environment that you see today is an accumulation of countless dreams, built on the backs of other dreams and accomplished by generations of hard work and community spirit. As you step into the next cityscape, what will your dreams be for this region, and how will you go about making them happen?