

California Dreaming: How Architect Joseph H. Wohleb Shaped the City We Know

by Heather Lockman

There was something about Olympia—something, well, *different* from other western Washington cities. I noticed it when I moved here in 1987, but it took me awhile to pinpoint exactly what it was. Not the scenery, certainly. Not the murky smell of low tide. Not the pedestrian-friendly streets of a city platted and laid out before the age of the automobile. It wasn't even the Capitol, which—for all of its stateliness—makes very little impression on the center of town.

It was, I realized, *stucco*. Stucco walls, red clay roofs,

and glazed ceramic tile—peculiarly sunny features in a Puget Sound town where it rains almost daily from Halloween until Easter. While a number of Northwest cities can offer a few examples of the “California” building style of the early 20th century, Olympia has nearly a dozen *faux* adobe structures in its historic core. They are so much a part of the streetscape that few of us even notice them now, or wonder how they got here. But nearly all of them can be traced to a single prolific architect who came to town in 1911, hung out his shingle on what was then



In this view from the 1930s, looking north on Washington Street as it crosses Fifth Avenue, every corner of the intersection boasts a building designed by Joseph Wohleb. The Mission-influenced Jeffers Studio can be seen at the far right. Courtesy Private Collection.



Built in 1927 as the newspaper office and printing plant for *The Daily Olympian*, this charming building on Capitol Way was one of Wohleb's most distinctive California-style designs. Courtesy Katherine Robinson.

Main Street, and changed the face of Olympia—starting with stucco and terra cotta—over the next 40 years.

Exactly how Joseph Wohleb came to be an architect isn't entirely clear. Born in Connecticut but raised in the San Francisco Bay area, he dropped out of high school in 1902 and apprenticed as a boat builder in the same naval shipyard where his father was employed. By the time he was 21, Wohleb had logged three years at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard and one as a private boat builder in the city of San Francisco; at 23, he was apparently living back with his parents again, listing himself as a carpenter in the Vallejo city directory. Only a few months later, he was setting up shop in Olympia as an architect from L.A.

"J. H. Wohleb, an architect from Los Angeles, Cal., arrived in Olympia Wednesday," reported the *Daily Olympian* in April of 1911. "Mr. Wohleb has been making a specialty of bungalows and residences . . . being familiar with the various bungalow styles so popular in California."

For an architect just getting started, the town at the foot of Budd Inlet must have seemed like a promising place. Olympia was just wrapping up a highly ambitious dredge-and-fill project that deepened its shallow harbor

and added acres of buildable land north of the business district. Streets and sidewalks had finally been paved, eliminating the mud and dust that perpetually plagued downtown. And after a 17-year delay, legislators were ready at last to finance a new State Capitol, cementing Olympia's future as the seat of state government. Washington's capital city was a place of unbridled optimism, eager to reinvent itself as a modern American town.

A Style With A Spanish Accent

Most of Wohleb's earliest projects were, indeed, "bungalows and residences," especially in the new neighborhood up near the capitol site. But the young architect's first commission was a small downtown studio for photographer Joseph Jeffers. Built in 1913 at the corner of Fifth and Washington, the modest Jeffers Studio featured stucco walls, terra-cotta roof tiles, and a rounded front parapet—all characteristic elements of the Mission Revival style, inspired by the historic Spanish missions of the Southwest. Though increasingly popular in California, the picturesque architectural style doesn't appear to have caught on in Olympia overnight. After the Jeffers commission, it would be nearly a decade before Wohleb returned in earnest to the Spanish/Mediterranean style that was all the rage back home.

He tried it next on Olympia's schools. Between 1922 and 1929, Wohleb designed four local elementary schools, giving each one a similar stucco-and-red-tile motif. He tried it, too, on a house for one of Olympia's wealthiest couples. Shortly after his first stucco school, Wohleb produced a grand Mediterranean villa in the South Capitol neighborhood for prominent banker C. J. Lord and his wife, Elizabeth.

Auto showrooms and service stations were particularly well suited to the low-slung, slightly exotic style that vaguely suggested travel and the lure of the open road. Two commercial garages by Wohleb, both with a definite Southwest theme, appeared in 1922 on the same block of Franklin Street. (One of them is gone now; the other has been completely disguised as a furniture store). It wasn't long after that before a

whole host of Olympia merchants found themselves coming around to Wohleb's Spanish-accented style.

Sometimes the effect was subtle, as with the tile decoration on the Capitol Theater annex. Sometimes it was unmistakable, as with the arched, leaded windows on the local newspaper office, or the sun-washed, south-of-the-border feel of the Olympia Knitting Mill. Even the downtown First Christian Church, essentially English Gothic, somehow acquired the light stucco finish, moderate roof pitch, and rounded "arrow slit" windows of a Mediterranean church. Interestingly, Wohleb used the style very rarely on private houses. One of the few examples, aside from the Lord Mansion, is the house he designed on Sherman Street for oysterman Earl Brenner, replete with Spanish arches, clay tiles, and wrought-iron details.

New Decade, New Ideas

By the early 1930s, the romantic California style had largely run its course. Fashion moved on and Wohleb did, too, abandoning Old World accents for the sleek, unsentimental lines of Art Deco and Streamline Moderne. Less obvious, perhaps, than his earlier Southwest buildings, his work from the Thirties and Forties is nevertheless an integral part of Olympia's physical character. The former Thurston County Courthouse near the Capitol, the round-towered shopping center at Capitol Boulevard and O'Farrell Street, and the venerable, much-loved Spar Café are familiar, enduring examples of Wohleb's Moderne style.

It was also during the Thirties that the architect was hired by the State to complete a list of projects on the unfinished Capital Campus. The Deco-style Newhouse Building, the now-doomed Campus greenhouse, the pedestal of the Soldiers Memorial, and the Neo-Classical House and Senate office buildings (conceived, but never developed, by original Capitol architects Wilder and White) were all additions by Wohleb to the State Capitol grounds.

In the later years of his life, Wohleb formed a partnership with his son Robert, also an architect, and concentrated primarily on large commercial projects

outside Olympia. Perhaps there was simply no room here for any more Joseph Wohleb designs. When he died in 1958, at the age of 70, he left behind a standing inventory of nearly a hundred buildings in his adopted hometown.

Stodgy Stucco Fingerprints

There's nothing flashy about Wohleb's work. The structures he left us are solid and squat, as sturdy as the ships he built when he was still in his teens. Thoroughly unassuming, never quite rising to elegance, they don't pretend to be anything more than the stout, small-town buildings they are.

And that seems to suit Olympia fine. We like things funky, not fussy. We admire a little flair now and then, but we don't really go for glitz. We like the maroon-colored tile on The Spar, the massive art-glass canopy over the Elks Building entrance, the row of Art Deco eagles perched on the old county courthouse. We like the masks and winged horses on the front of the Capitol Theater. But that's as fancy as we want to get.

When residents say they treasure what's *unique* about downtown Olympia—the quirky and distinctive look that sets it apart from later suburban strip-mall development—it's Wohleb's city they're talking about. His stodgy stucco fingerprints are everywhere you look. Between State and Seventh Avenues, from Franklin Street to Columbia, it's hard to walk more than a block in this town without passing a building that Joseph Wohleb designed, expanded, or altered in the course of his long career. If few of them are true standouts, the full array, taken together, is largely what gives downtown Olympia its mellow, cohesive feel.

He may not be Frank Lloyd Wright, but he's ours.

Joseph H. Wohleb, rock on.

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