

April 14, 2009

To: Mayor Sam Adams and Portland City Council

Re: Proposed Demolition of the Memorial Coliseum

The Bosco-Milligan Foundation **opposes the demolition of Memorial Coliseum** on the grounds that Memorial Coliseum is a significant architectural resource from the post-World War II era in Portland. It has only now reaching the fifty-year age eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and it clearly qualifies for listing. A hasty demolition also lacks the sustainability element that most Portland residents identify with today and would erase not only a primary resource representing the social and cultural heritage of our city, but also have a tremendous negative impact on the environment.

The Memorial Coliseum is listed as a Rank-1 resource on the City of Portland's Historic Resource Inventory (HRI). This alone should act as recognition of the building's significance to the city. Other Rank-1 resources from the HRI include: the Benson Hotel, the Hollywood Theater, the Arlington Club and Jackson Tower.

Memorial Coliseum represents a significant technological feat of engineering and operation unrivaled by any other large civic structure in the Pacific Northwest. It is also a significant example of International Style Modernism, designed by the Portland office of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM). The building is significant for showcasing this style in a public building, something that was unusual for SOM and others at the time of its construction. The importance of SOM on Portland's built environment in the post-war era is undeniable. Not only did SOM architects design the Memorial Coliseum, they also designed the Standard Plaza (1963) and the U.S. Bancorp Tower (1983). These SOM buildings are also landmarks of the recent past in Portland, but only the Memorial Coliseum is a civic building; the rest are private.

The Coliseum was designed with a free-standing interior seating bowl, which should allow for the adaptive re-use of the building's interior, without losing the building's exterior character – which thousands of Portlanders have come to recognize and appreciate.

In 1961, the Coliseum won an Honor Award from the Oregon AIA. Pulitzer Prize winning architecture critic Allan Temko characterized the building soon after it opened as glowing *"like a civic beacon in the heart of the regional metropolis"* and *"an expression of vitality in a city which, since pioneer days, has curiously lacked gusto, the Coliseum is a rousing success."* (Architectural Forum – April, 1961.)

The building was dedicated in 1961 to the *"advancement of cultural opportunities for the community and to the memory of our veterans of all wars who made the supreme sacrifice."* Included in the design was an inside room meant to serve as a *"quiet shrine to the gallant servicemen who did not return from the wars."* A memorial wall outside the building, in a fountain court on the arena level, was also constructed.

The Coliseum has also achieved significance as a cultural and social icon of the city.

Portland was awarded a National Basketball Association franchise in 1970, in large part because of the Memorial Coliseum. Other sports teams have played and continue to play here and numerous social and civic functions have been hosted in the structure.

The decision to locate Memorial Coliseum in its present location was made in the mid-1950s after much debate and numerous studies by public agencies; the site was chosen as a political compromise. In the end, 476 homes and dozens of businesses – primarily African American – were destroyed to build Memorial Coliseum. Livelihoods were permanently affected and the equity ownerships in those properties were never made whole. **Now, the sacrifices that were forced upon these hundreds of families and businesses are proposed to be disregarded, by demolishing the Coliseum, also disregarding its useful life as a substantial structure and the public investment in it.**

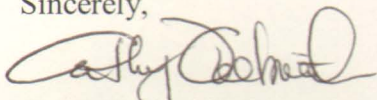
It is estimated that the amount of embodied energy (the amount of energy used in construction, fabrication and delivery of materials) in the Coliseum is equivalent to the amount of energy in more than 3 million gallons of gasoline. **To demolish the Coliseum would be a waste of all of that energy and added to the amount of energy required to build a new structure at the site would take decades to offset the amount of lost energy and impact upon our landfills and our environment.**

To quote Richard Moe, President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation: *"It makes no sense for us to recycle newsprint and bottles and aluminum cans while we're throwing away entire buildings"*. We hope that you will also see the value in preserving Memorial Coliseum, not only for its architectural significance, which is plentiful, but for the unsustainable impacts that would otherwise occur through the building's demolition.

As long ago as 1990, the issues of the environmental sustainability of historic preservation were being articulated on the national front. *"Historic preservation makes sense in large measure because historic preservation makes dollars and cents. To make a brick today to build a building on a site where there is already a building steals from two generations. It steals from the generation that built the brick originally by throwing away their asset before its work is done. And it steals from a future generation by using increasingly scarce natural resources today, when they should be saved for tomorrow. We have already consumed enough of somebody else's assets – it's time for us to make better use of our own. Historic preservation is the way to do that."* (Donovan Rypkema.)

Please preserve the Memorial Coliseum for current and future generations to enjoy, while also supporting Portland's well-recognized desire for an environmental, cultural, social and economically sustainable city.

Sincerely,



Cathy Galbraith, Executive Director
Bosco-Milligan Foundation