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Mid-century buildings take stage at symposium

You probably wouldn't demolish a Victorian home. But what about the odd-looking, yet still classic, Tepanyaki Steak House?

The Tepanyaki Steak House at the corner of Garden and Main - originally a Sambo's Restaurant built in 1966 - could be a crusty diamond in need of polish.

Or maybe it is a carbuncle on the landscape that wouldn't be missed.

Either way, it is historic.

Googie Style (and that's no typo) with undulating roofs, boomerang sides and eye-grabbing signs, was popular for roadside eateries in the '50s and '60s.

"I don't know if it's a treasure, and it isn't my place to say," says Dan Everhart, an architectural historian with the Idaho Transportation Department who is organizing a three-day symposium on mid-century design in Boise next week.

"My job is to tell people this is called the Googie Style of architecture, and this is the only one in Boise," he said. "If we tear it down, we demolish 100 percent of the Googie architecture in the Valley. Maybe we tear it down anyway, at least we do it with our eyes open."

Other Boise sites from the post-war era have been altered or demolished - like the Moxie Java flying-saucer building at Vista and Kootenai and South Junior High - and Everhart says little study of architecture from the booming post-war period has been published.

But public agencies like ITD are required to consider the historic significance of all sites when approving a construction project, and they are struggling to understand the styles, materials and trends that defined the mid-century era, from the late 1940s to the early 1970s.

"Important buildings have already been lost or compromised, and as growth continues, others will be lost before we have the chance to evaluate them if we don't start soon," Everhart said.

The predominant style of the era is marked by a lack of embellishment, and the use of strong vertical and horizontal lines. (Some may call it boxy.)

"Mid-century architecture takes a less dramatic presence from the street and is designed with strict functionality in mind," said Everhart.

He points out the ITD building, designed by Boise architect Charles Hummel in 1966. Using new materials and techniques, Hummel created one of the area's first curtain walls, which suspends glass and steel panels on a concrete and steel skeleton.

To remedy the lack of information, the ITD and Preservation Idaho are hosting Modernism in the Northwest. The event will include lectures on identifying mid-century styles and interior design of the era. Everhart will lead a three-hour bus tour of mid-century architecture in Boise, and a cocktail party at a classic modern home in the Foothills will benefit Preservation Idaho.

"Our goal is to provide enough information for people to identify these styles in Boise or Winnemucca or anywhere else they occur, so communities and policy makers can make informed decisions," he said.

Similar mistakes were made in the 1960s, he says. Strip malls were going up on every corner.

"There were so many Queen Anne Victorian buildings and they were so passe that they couldn't knock them down fast enough," Everhart said.

Fifty years later, the idea of demolishing a Victorian home is shocking, but the idea of knocking down a strip mall is less so.

"As more and more mid-century architecture is lost, people will realize its value - hopefully, before the wholesale demolition. But there is always some blood-letting," Everhart said. "I suspect in the next 20 years, a third or more of these buildings will be drastically altered or destroyed."

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