Bosco-Milligan Foundation

By Richard Engeman

The Bosco-Milligan Foundation of Portland was founded in 1987 by Jerry Bosco and Ben Milligan to protect their collection of architectural elements and to further the cause of education about the city's architectural history. The foundation operates the Architectural Heritage Center, which carries on a program of lectures, house and walking tours, and exhibits about Portland architecture. It also cares for a large collection of architectural pieces, including stained-glass windows, cast iron storefronts, newel posts, hardware pieces, and plasterwork; these often form the basis of exhibits at the Center.

The foundation's creators formed a partnership that was personal, avocational, and professional. As a teenager, Jerry Bosco, who was born in Portland in 1938, began collecting pieces of buildings that were being demolished. He graduated from Portland State University with an art degree, obtained a teaching certificate, and began a high school teaching career. In 1964, he was introduced to Ben Milligan. Milligan, born in Texas in 1937 and raised in Hanford, Washington, was also a collector, of comic books and arrowheads. Both were involved in restoring picture frames, and their mutual interests soon led them to become a couple. They bought their first house in 1965, a Victorian-era duplex in Portland.

The Victorian era, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, was particularly appealing to Bosco and Milligan, and together they began acquiring not only Victorian building parts but also entire buildings. Attracted to glass window art, they collected pieces by the noted Portland firm of Povey Brothers and became art glass producers themselves in the 1970s.

Milligan was diagnosed with AIDS in 1986, and Bosco was diagnosed with the disease in 1987. Together, they assured the preservation and educational use of their collection. The Bosco-Milligan Foundation began in 1987 as a project of the Historic Preservation League of Oregon (now Restore Oregon), largely funded through the sale of properties owned by the couple. Milligan died in 1987, and Bosco died in 1988.

The foundation hired historic preservation and planning expert Cathy Galbraith as its first executive director in 1992 and began active membership recruitment in 1995. That same year, a national survey of architectural artifact collections identified the foundation holdings as among the nation's five largest. The size and complexity of the collection has been both an asset and a burden to the organization, as the foundation has struggled to find suitable rental storage sites and to complete curatorial inventories.

The foundation owned West's Block, which had once housed Bosco's and Milligan's glass operations, and it became the organization's headquarters. Built in 1883 in East Portland, West's Block underwent extensive restoration and rehabilitation work between 1994 and 2005. It became a notable venue for exhibits, lectures, and meetings as well as a key structure in the East Portland Grand Avenue historic district. Under Galbraith's leadership, the foundation instituted a series of programs and interior tours on historic home restoration, and the annual Old House Revival Tour and Annual Heritage Auction became significant Portland events. The foundation also established a research library focused on the city's architectural legacy.

In recent years, the Bosco-Milligan Foundation has expanded its advocacy of the cultural and economic value of historic preservation and the benefits of retaining and re-using historical structures. The Architectural Heritage Center offers tours of historic Portland neighborhoods, as well as lectures on Portland-area architects and historic building materials. The foundation of Bosco-Milligan was built on the Victorian era buildings that its founders favored and has expanded through the collection of architectural artifacts from the late twentieth century and beyond.

Sources

Architectural Heritage Center: http://visitahc.org

“Hands-on Heritage.” Interview of Cathy Galbraith by Demetra Aposporos, *Old-House Journal* (January-February 2009).

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https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/bosco-milligan-foundation/