

## **What can Eugene learn from Rome?**

*By James Tice*

What can Eugene learn from one the most architecturally rich cities in the world?

As it turns out, a lot.

Rome may not be the first city that comes to mind when you think of Eugene, but there are lessons to be learned from this ancient city as we debate the future of Eugene City Hall, the Willamette Riverfront, Civic Stadium, west 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue and other hot button city planning issues.

Here are five principles of Roman architecture that urban planners from Eugene or Springfield — or any city for that matter — can apply to make their cities more beautiful and enduring:

### 1. Continuity Counts

Focusing only on new construction is a limiting attitude. Rome offers valuable lessons about using what we have rather than just demolishing it and starting with a clean slate. In some cases the Romans used what they had for pragmatic reasons, such as building with the materials that were at hand, but they also recognized the value of continuity. Some of the most important spaces in Rome are the result of several hundred years of continuity— of building on what others have done — and you can see examples that go back a couple thousand years. You can find history seeping through Rome all over the place. This is a very respectful attitude and one that makes for a richer city.

### 2 Age does not equal value

For me it's not enough that a building be old. For a building to be valued, it has to be alive today to make sense. I'm all for tilting toward preserving historic structures, but I would still want them to be meaningful, to be beautiful, to be an important part of the city, to have potential. When I look at Hayward Field, for example, I see a beautiful building, absolutely exquisite. I see the way it's structured, the way it's designed, the way you move up the bleachers toward the sky, the way it defines the edge of the city, and how it really becomes one of the set pieces on campus.

### 3. Public buildings should be public

Part of the problem with Eugene's old city hall is that, from an urban design point of view, it is a most inappropriate building because it doesn't have a public face. It's hidden. It's located behind closed doors. One sign of the genius of Rome is that important buildings always had a public space as part of their identity, a space that was an integral part of the building. It's all about accountability, being on view, being part of a forum, a place of public appearance as the great architect Louis Kahn has said.

### 4. A city needs structure

If you don't have the armature — the structure of a city that allows inhabitants to enjoy and be proud of their city, to do their business but also have places for festivals and

special occasions — I think a city is impoverished. Rome has those places in spades. Romans live in their city in a way that is relaxed and enviable. The spaces, these outdoor rooms that they have, give life to the city. A city should have outdoor rooms. People like outdoor rooms. The quadrangle on the UO campus, the one by the library, is a big outdoor room. And when Obama came to Eugene where do you think he went? To the quadrangle.

#### 5. It's not about the weather

People in Eugene like to use our sometimes-inhospitable weather as an excuse for a shortage of public gathering spaces, but I don't think it's about climate, it's about the nature of urban space and how it's designed and imagined. If you go to Helsinki, Finland, you will find a northern city that has a very severe climate, but there are urban outdoor spaces everywhere and they are well-defined. They surround the Senate Square and there is a linear park called the Esplanade, which is carved, out space in the dense downtown fabric. Even in the middle of winter, people are in those spaces using those spaces like an extension of their living rooms, which in a sense they are.

I'm not arguing that Eugene can or should be like Helsinki or Rome or that it's not a great place to live, only that there are certain architectural principles that have made these cities great — principles we can all learn from and aspire to incorporate into our city to make it even better.

*James Tice is a professor of architecture at the University of Oregon who specializes in the cartography and urban history of Rome. At 5 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 6, he will deliver the [UO Presidential Research Lecture, "Mapping Rome,"](#) in 177 Lawrence Hall. The event is free and open to the public.*