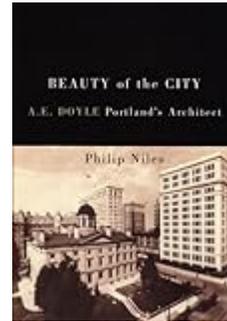




**Philip Niles.** *Beauty of the City: A. E. Doyle, Portland's Architect.* Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008. xvi + 278 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87071-298-2.



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## Portland's Architect, A. E. Doyle

A. E. Doyle was the most important architect in Portland, Oregon, in the first quarter of the twentieth century. His firm was responsible for the design of a majority of the major downtown buildings, as well as a wide variety of institutional, educational, and residential structures. Yet today Doyle is most often remembered as the architect who gave Pietro Belluschi his start. Brief accounts of Doyle's practice have previously appeared in *Space, Style and Structure: Building in Northwest America* (1974), *Frozen Music: A History of Portland Architecture* (1985), and *Pietro Belluschi: Modern American Architect* (1994). Philip Niles's new book, *Beauty of the City*, is the first full-length biography of Doyle.

Albert Ernest Doyle (1877-1928) came to Portland with his family before 1882. In 1893, soon after completing eighth grade, Doyle began working for Portland's leading architects, Whidden & Lewis. He remained at the firm as a drafter through 1905, with the exception of the two years spent in New York working for Henry Bacon (today best known for his design of the Lincoln Memorial). In 1906 Doyle traveled in Europe. The next year he

opened his own architectural office.

A. E. Doyle, as he was known professionally, was fortunate to start his practice just as Portland was beginning a building boom. With his knowledge of European precedents and his recent experience in New York, Doyle was the Portland architect best prepared to take on the challenges of the new steel-framed downtown buildings. He also had an affable, ingratiating personality and proved adept at cultivating the city's business and cultural elite. Doyle quickly received commissions for large buildings and, at some point in 1907, likely to manage his sudden success, he formed a partnership with another local architect, William B. Patterson. Patterson served as engineer and project superintendent, freeing Doyle to focus primarily on client development and design. Over the next seven years, Doyle & Patterson was responsible for thirteen major downtown buildings, including department stores, office blocks, hotels and the central library. In 1911 the firm provided a campus plan for the new Reed College and thereafter designed the first campus buildings. (From 1911 to 1913 a third partner was

added, engineer James Beach, and the firm was called Doyle, Patterson & Beach.)

Like other successful architects of his generation, Doyle was skilled in designing in multiple styles. Many of his downtown buildings were clad in white terra cotta and these typically drew on classical precedents. The Reed buildings were brick structures that can be characterized as collegiate gothic. Doyle also designed residential buildings; several cottages of his design at the coastal resort of Neahkahnie would inspire a later generation of Oregon architects seeking an appropriate modern regional mode.

As the economy declined after 1912, Doyle's firm, which had twenty employees at its peak, was scaled back and the partnership came to an end in 1915. For the next several years, Doyle practiced as a sole proprietor with just a few employees. It was not until the early 1920s that Portland's economy, and Doyle's practice, truly rebounded. In the 1920s his firm designed several more large downtown office buildings. Most drew from the precedent of the Renaissance palazzo; the Pacific Building (1926) is notable for the simplicity of its rectilinear expression and its minimal detail.

Doyle's last years were marred by illness. A trip to Europe in 1926-27 was intended to allow him to relax and recuperate, but his health continued to decline. He died in Portland in January 1928. Doyle's contributions to the city were heralded the day after his death in an obituary on the front page of *The Oregonian* that called him "the designer of Portland's skyline."

*Beauty of the City* does not end with Doyle's death, however. As Niles explains, shortly before his death, Doyle took in three partners and reorganized his practice as A. E. Doyle and Associates. After his death, Doyle's partners carried on under this name. Pietro Belluschi, who had joined the office in 1925, was not initially a partner, but he was the primary designer in the reorganized firm. He rose to prominence with the design of the new Portland Art Museum (1931-32), which was executed in a modern idiom. Belluschi assumed full control in 1943, fifteen years after Doyle's death, and the firm's name was changed to Pietro Belluschi, Architect. (Belluschi went on to become an important and prolific modern architect, who served as dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT from 1951 to 1965, and won a Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects' [AIA] in 1972.)

*Beauty of the City* is a traditional biography. The

book focuses on the life and career of A. E. Doyle. The book is strongest on Doyle's own life and on his relationships with Portland business leaders like department store owner Sigmund Frank and lumberman and real estate developer Simon Benson, as well as cultural leaders like Thomas Lamb Eliot, Anna Belle Crocker, and Harry Wentz. There are occasional explorations of the larger context, but primarily to enhance the discussion of Doyle. Thus, in chapter 3 Niles includes a brief discussion of the professionalization of Portland architecture, including the formation of the Portland Architectural Club in 1906, the beginning of the Oregon Chapter of the AIA in 1911, and the institution of architectural licensing in Oregon in 1919. In chapter 9 he presents an overview of the nascent modernism that influenced Portland's architectural culture after the mid 1920s.

The primary source for research on Doyle is the collection of Doyle's business records and drawings, which are held at Syracuse University as part of the Pietro Belluschi papers. In addition, Niles was fortunate to secure the cooperation of many Doyle descendants and others who hold important documents. Niles also sought out the details of Doyle's early life and education and, as a result, corrects multiple errors found in previous publications.

The strength of *Beauty of the City* is the thoroughness of the biographical research. The book is less effective as a work of architectural or urban history. Doyle emerged as a successful architect just as the steel frame was allowing Portland buildings to achieve a new scale, and mechanical and electrical systems were becoming increasingly complex. Niles quotes Doyle regarding these design challenges: "A modern department store is so full of pipes and wires and utilities of service and problems that should all be carefully worked out" (p. 220). How Doyle and his firm handled the new complexities of large buildings with their interior systems is not well addressed, however. Nor does Niles clearly discuss how Doyle ran his firm and precisely what role he played in his designs. Niles asserts that Doyle was completely in control of all the work his office produced (p. xii), but how Doyle exercised design control when the firm was handling multiple large and complex projects, and the staff grew to twenty, is not explained. In fact, Niles quotes Doyle's statement that he "loved to draw," but that "he was not able to do very much of it because the business end took so much time" (p. 16). There is no doubt that Doyle was the design leader of the firm; he was also the primary contact with clients. How then did he manage all the projects?

Similarly, Niles offers a somewhat limited exploration of the urban context in which Doyle's firm carried out its work. The map in the Preface showing the locations of Doyle buildings in downtown Portland is not adequate to illustrate Niles's brief discussion of the early twentieth-century development of what might be called Portland's "streetcar downtown," distinct from its earlier "pedestrian downtown" along the Willamette River (p. 72). Doyle's buildings were likely shaped in part by Portland's building regulations, but Niles does not address these regulations in any detail. The tall buildings Doyle designed typically were built to the property line with little use of setbacks, an approach that was likely influenced, at least in part, by the relatively small downtown Portland blocks (200 by 200 feet), but the effect of block size on building form is not analyzed.[1]

*Beauty of the City* offers a useful introduction to the life and career of a significant architect. It would have been more useful, however, had it followed some typical practices in biographical monographs in architectural history. First, although an illustration is provided for each major work discussed, few interiors and no plans have been included. It would have been impossible to include a plan of every building, but since Niles argues that Doyle focused on efficiency and on providing buildings appropriate to the functions they housed (p. 220), a selection of representative plans should have been included to support this claim. Similarly, Doyle's proposed Reed College plan anticipated "a large university" (p. 86), but an overall view of campus plan is not provided.[2] Second, there is no complete chronological list of Doyle's works. The list provided (pp. 231-234) includes only "major jobs," and is divided into "Public Buildings" and "Houses"; within those categories works are listed alphabetically, making it hard to trace the evolution of Doyle's

practice. (A complete list is apparently available in a Reed College M.A. thesis (p. xiii), but that document is not easily accessible to scholars.) Further, the dates of buildings on the list do not appear to follow an explicit dating convention. Architectural historians generally agree that building dates should begin with the year a commission is received in an architect's office and end with the year when the client or user occupies the completed building. If only a single date is given, it should be the year of occupancy.

A. E. Doyle's career began just a century ago. His success as an architect may be measured in part by the fact that almost all of his major buildings continue to serve commercial, educational, institutional, and residential users in Portland and in other locations across the Pacific Northwest. *Beauty of the City* presents the life and career of a man who contributed substantially to the character of his city and region. However, this book offers only the beginning of a detailed analysis of the precise nature of his contribution.

#### Notes

[1]. An introduction to building and development patterns in downtown Portland from 1905 to 1930 is offered by Virginia Guest Ferriday, *Last of the Handmade Buildings: Glazed Terra Cotta in Downtown Portland* (Portland: Mark Publishing, 1984), 7-25.

[2]. A perspective illustration of the Reed College plan is found in Paul Venable Turner, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (New York: Architectural History Foundation; Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1984), 222; and in Meredith Clausen, *Pietro Belluschi: Modern American Architect* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1994), 35.

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