

# Oregon Historic Site Record

LOCATION AND PROPERTY NAME			
<b>address:</b>	1020 SW Naito Pkwy Portland, Multnomah County	<b>historic name:</b>	Visitors Information Center
<b>assoc addresses:</b>	1020-1021 SW Front Ave	<b>current/other names:</b>	Portland Visitors Information Center; McCall's Waterfront Restaurant
<b>location descr:</b>		<b>block/lot/tax lot:</b>	
		<b>townshp/rng/sect/qtr sect:</b>	1S 9E 4
PROPERTY CHARACTERISTICS			
<b>resource type:</b>	Building	<b>height (stories):</b>	4.0
<b>elig evaluation:</b>	eligible/significant	<b>total elig resources:</b>	1
<b>prim constr date:</b>	1949	<b>NR Status:</b>	Individually Listed
	<b>second date:</b>	<b>date indiv listed:</b>	09/24/2010
<b>primary orig use:</b>	GOVERNMENT: General	<b>orig use comments:</b>	
<b>second orig use:</b>		<b>prim style comments:</b>	
<b>primary style:</b>	International	<b>sec style comments:</b>	
<b>secondary style:</b>		<b>siding comments:</b>	
<b>primary siding:</b>	Wood Sheet	<b>architect:</b>	John Yeon
<b>secondary siding:</b>	Other	<b>builder:</b>	
<b>plan type:</b>			
<b>comments/notes:</b>			
Nomination prepared in 1976 but returned by the National Register because it didn't meet the 50-year age requirement (at that time).			
GROUPINGS / ASSOCIATIONS			
Not associated with any surveys or groupings.			
SHPO INFORMATION FOR THIS PROPERTY			
<b>NR date listed:</b>	09/24/2010	<b>106 Project(s):</b>	None
<b>ILS survey date:</b>		<b>Special Assess Project(s):</b>	None
<b>RLS survey date:</b>		<b>Federal Tax Project(s):</b>	None
<b>Gen file date:</b>	09/15/1975		
ARCHITECTURAL / PROPERTY DESCRIPTION			
<i>(Includes expanded description of the building/property, setting, significant landscape features, outbuildings and alterations)</i>			
<p>Summary Paragraph The Visitors Information Center is located in downtown Portland, Oregon, at 1020 SW Naito Parkway, Portland OR, 97204. The building, designed by John Yeon, is a low, flat-roofed structure with walls of painted plywood and glass. It was constructed in 1947-48 to house the Portland Chamber of Commerce, next to what was at that time the only freeway in Portland. The building sits at the western edge of a linear park extending alongside the Willamette River, between the alignments of SW Salmon Street and SW Main Street. A pull-out driveway and parking area separate the building from SW Naito Parkway. The front façade, facing SW Naito, consists of an inset glass window-wall with double doors between two enclosed volumes of different heights. One of these is two stories in height, but the rest of the building is single-story. The construction of the building is wood-frame, concrete slab-on-grade, with a flat roof using single-ply roofing system. The Visitors Information Center has remained under City of Portland ownership, and the building retains most of its original design features. The building has lost some integrity in the areas of original workmanship and materials that have been replaced over time, and its setting has been altered with the 1975 removal of the freeway, making the building an object in a park along the riverfront. However, the property retains many of its original characteristics, with elements of the International Style of architecture as well as of the Northwest Regional Style of architecture. Narrative Description The Visitors Information Center is located within Governor Tom McCall Waterfront Park, a linear greenspace of approximately 36 acres along the west bank of the Willamette River in downtown Portland. The building sits approximately 275 feet north of the Hawthorne Bridge, and has street frontage at its west side towards SW Naito Parkway (see Figure 2, Figure 3, and Photo 01). The 200-foot block pattern is not exactly aligned to cartographic directions at this area, but instead is oriented orthogonally to the riverfront, with true north pointing about 20 degrees westward from the north-south street alignments. The boundaries of the nominated area of the site are to the curb of SW Naito Parkway at its western side; to the northern edge of the garden shed and pergola at its northern side; to the eastern face of the building and pergola at its eastern side; and to the southern parcel boundary at its southern side. This area holds to the edge of the building at the north and east, where re-grading and other site changes have occurred, but retains the original site boundaries at the west and south. Figure 1 illustrates this boundary. A five-story office building constructed in 1978 occupies the block across Naito Parkway to the west. To the north of the site is a large circular water feature which is heavily used during warm weather. The Salmon Street Springs fountain, set in a concrete plaza, and a stepped bowl terrace at the river's edge were constructed in 1984. Between the northernmost edge of the original Visitors Center garden enclosure and the Salmon Street Springs fountain is a mostly-paved transition area with benches, allowing for access to the bike rental facility housed in the original garden shed. The stepped terrace area acts as the moorage and embarking site for the Portland Spirit, a small cruise ship that provides 2-hour trips on the Willamette River. Tickets for the boat tours are sold at the small kiosk in the northwest corner of the original garden area. East of the building, the paved Esplanade walkway along the seawall continues south of the stepped terrace, with a planted lawn area between the Esplanade and the Visitors Information Center building. A line of shrubs and small trees between the lawn and the pergola partially obscures views of the building from the Esplanade. To the south, an open lawn area extends to the Hawthorne Bridge, with a concrete walkway along the southern edge of the building connecting the Esplanade with Naito Parkway. Exterior Description The Visitors Information Center is a low, rectangular building designed on a strict 3-foot grid and featuring four enclosed "pavilions" connected by lighter elements: a glassed-in central area, a pergola, and a garden wall. In plan the arrangement pinwheels around the visually open glass center, with the pavilion pieces extending out beyond the glass enclosure plane. The building's primary entry faces west, towards the city. The visually open center of the building physically connects three of the more-enclosed pavilions, and the pergola extending to the north connects the fourth pavilion, a garden shed, to the building. The primary exterior wall materials of the Visitors Information Center are wood and glass. The primary west elevation faces downtown (Photo 03). The elevation has a central glass window-wall with a pair of double entry doors. This glass wall is set back between two enclosed rectangular blocks: a two-story unit at the north (referred to here as the north pavilion) and a shorter unit at the south (referred to here as the west pavilion). The solid wall panels are painted plywood. Both the glass and the plywood walls are constructed in the same way, with painted wood vertical divisions uniformly every three linear feet, and the exterior wall panels set behind the wood verticals. The west end of the taller, north pavilion piece has a sign of pin-mounted metal letters using the same style and location of the building's original sign. Also, a portion of garden wall extends to the north from the north pavilion. A linear parking area is located between the building and SW Naito Parkway (see Figure 3 and Photo 02). The south façade, similarly to the west façade, has a glass wall set between two more-enclosed pavilions (Photo 04). The south wall of the west pavilion, on the left, has solid plywood panels, with a row of painted wood louvers along the top edge. This pavilion extends out further than the exterior wall of the east pavilion, and is slightly taller than the primary roof plane. On the right, the east pavilion's south-facing wall has had most of its original solid panels replaced by glass, but the vertical wood divisions still occur every three feet on center. The central glass window-wall is inset from the two flanking units. Above the roof, the upper-story south façade of the north pavilion is visible, with a door providing access to the roof at this side. At the east elevation, a 12-foot wide pergola attaches on its southern end to the east pavilion and extends northward past the end of the building (Photo 05). At its north end, the pergola is attached to an 18-foot long garden shed structure located just behind it. The pergola itself has steel posts and a grid of wood members overhead. The east pavilion's east wall has door-height glass panels and solid plywood panels above the glass. The glass central area of the building opens out with a</p>			

series of double doors directly to the pergola. Above the pergola, the east end of the north pavilion is just visible extending up beyond. Atop the garden shed structure, a rooftop neon rose sign has been installed. The sign is held up over the roof by two metal posts and is approximately 15 feet in length. The northern edge of Yeon's original design was demarcated by the end of the long pergola structure, the end wall of the garden pavilion, and the garden wall. The pergola and garden pavilion structures remain, and a portion of the garden wall extends northward from the north wall of the building. The original lily pond remains as well, with its original piping and drains; it has now been re-lined and holds water once again. A Magnolia tree in the courtyard is believed to be from the original landscaping scheme. A small kiosk, "L"-shaped in plan, has been added in the northwest corner of what was the enclosed garden (photo 07). The north elevation of the building itself (Photo 06) has windows across 9 modules at the upper level, with louvers below. The glass wall of the main room, east of the north pavilion, is at a lower height, and includes a pair of glass double-doors allowing access to the north. Wall Details The walls have simple painted wood verticals every three feet on center, and the building is designed, both inside and out, around this three-foot module. Yeon had been working with a smaller 2-foot wide panel in residential designs just prior to the Visitors Information Center commission. The larger module reflects the more public scale of the building and also allows for doorways to fit between two verticals. The consistent plane of the exterior wall panel itself, which could be glass, painted plywood, or wood louvers, sits just behind the expressed wood structural framing. Windows are always fixed in place, but air circulation takes place via a fixed wood louver, with a hinged interior panel. These screened louvers, which Yeon typically placed above or below the fixed glass windows, were critical to his exacting detailing, allowing for a consistent plane for the panels whether glass or plywood, and a narrow, unobtrusive detail at the edges of the panels. Together, the fixed window with louver was termed a ventilator, and Yeon may have been the originator of the idea. Exterior plywood was also quite new at this time, with the invention of waterproof glues in 1934, and very few architects at this time aside from Yeon were experimenting with it. Each of the structural components of the building was separately colored with paint. "Yeon was a consummate colorist who applied the Northwest landscape's hues with a dexterity envied, and often borrowed, by many of his contemporaries. He articulated the visitors center's wood curtain wall in the complements of deep blue-greens and reds similar to a spruce tree's needles and bark." The building has been repainted using colors as closely matching as possible to Yeon's original color scheme. Interior Description The plan of the Visitors Information Center as constructed is shown in Figures 3 and 4. The building is 3,843 sf overall according to the current Multnomah tax assessment records, including a partial second story. The more specific functions of the building are located in the "pavilions," connected by the volume of the glassed-in central space. The central space is finished with a new dropped ceiling made of clear-grain wood boards with square recessed light fixtures of the original design in a grid placement. The ceiling throughout the building (except for the west pavilion) was a 6' by 6' grid of tongue-and-groove hemlock 1" by 6" boards, each square alternating direction, and this wood gridded ceiling still exists in most of the building above the newly installed ceiling. The flooring throughout the building is a new carpet tile, and below it is the original concrete floor with radiant heating pipes. The central space has a meeting room enclosed by glass partitions, so one sees through and beyond the meeting room's walls (Photo 12). The building has had many of the interior walls separating the pavilions from the primary space re-built using the same design, materials, and even color of the original Yeon design (Photo 11). A new built-in wood desk unit occupies the general area where the wood information desk originally was (Photos 11 and 15). Yeon's design had a large exhibition room in the western unit. There are now offices in that pavilion, divided by partition walls, but the partitions stop short of the clerestory windows (Photo 14). The original ceiling finish in this space, the same hemlock as originally used on the walls, is existing (Photo 14) though now partially covered by a new lower wood ceiling. The northern pavilion contains modern restrooms in the same location as the original restrooms and a ground-floor room (originally a smaller exhibition room), with the original hemlock wall finish. Between these functions is a small modern kitchen space. A storage and meeting room occupies the second level upstairs. Finishes in the stairwell and in the upper area are now painted gypsum wall board (Photo 13), although an area of the original striated plywood remains in the area beneath the stair. The eastern pavilion was originally divided up for staff offices and a conference room, and still has these same functions, but all wall finishes are new and the dropped ceiling is acoustical tile (Photos 10 and 11). Alterations In 1965, the Chamber of Commerce moved out, and the building came close to being demolished as part of the Harbor Drive re-alignment. The building was saved, but was renovated into office space for the Bureau of Architectural Planning in 1968. As part of this work, the building was re-roofed, the exterior was painted, and interior partitions installed. In 1974, further alterations were made to the building, including filling in door openings and the addition of another office. In 1975, Harbor Drive was removed and the surrounding area became Governor Tom McCall Waterfront Park. The Salmon Springs fountain, designed by Robert Perron, was installed just north of the building in 1984. Concurrently, a stepped terrace and small extension out over the seawall were constructed immediately east of the fountain. The west parking area for the Visitors Information Center building was redesigned, with landscaping added immediately west of the original garden wall and a pull-out driveway from Front Avenue allowing for vehicles to drop off people at the entry, and with angled parking extending along the front of the building. In 1988, the building became a restaurant. A number of changes were made to the building just prior to its new use, both to accommodate the restaurant use and also to address some deterioration of original materials. At the exterior of the building, the garden area was paved and expanded (with brick joints rather than the original gravel fill), and steps were added towards the south from the paved area. The ground plane on the east side was re-graded to bring the ground up closer to the level building and garden platform. (In photographs circa 1949-50, the northeast corner of the pergola base appears at least four feet in height above the original ground plane.) The pergola, after having blown down in a storm in 1962 and re-erected, was rebuilt with steel posts and with new steel beams sandwiched between wood beams every 12 feet. A portion of the original garden wall was rebuilt, in its original design and location, and the pond was filled in and given a temporary cover. Changes to the exterior of the building itself included the addition of a line of horizontal flashing extending around the building at the top of door height. New windows and a door replaced most of the original exterior plywood panels at the east pavilion. Most of the exterior trim pieces and plywood panels around the building were replaced with new wood and plywood to match the original design, and the building was re-roofed (including new wood sheathing) with a single-ply system rather than the original asphaltic built-up roof with gravel. At the interior of the building, the western pavilion became the restaurant kitchen, with new interior finishes and fixtures installed, and the northern pavilion's original (interior) east wall was removed entirely. The original linoleum tile was replaced by new flooring over the original slab with heating pipes. Restrooms have been redesigned, though are still in the northern pavilion. In 1994 the Portland Spirit cruise line had its ticket office kiosk constructed in the northwest corner of the courtyard. In 2003, more work and maintenance was done, including updates and repairs to the HVAC system, the windows, the doors, and the roof. In 2009, a number of alterations have been approved by the City of Portland and are currently being completed. These alterations include the change of use from restaurant to headquarters for a civic nonprofit organization, the Rose Festival. As part of this change, a neon rooftop sign (an image of a rose) was put up above the garden pavilion unit. Interior supports and strengthening were installed to adequately support the sign at this small freestanding structure. Conclusion In spite of these changes, the Visitors Information Center has not suffered any structural alterations, and its additions are relatively minor. The recent work to the building restored the interior pavilion walls to their original design, materials, and color scheme. Minor added exterior elements such as a metal canopy and some of the rooftop equipment have been removed, and the exterior has been repaired and repainted in its original color scheme. The detailing and design of the ceiling at the interior is very similar to the original design, and new interior finishes bring back the light, open feeling of the central space. On balance, the overall integrity is slightly impaired, but the property still effectively conveys its historical associations and period of significance. The original landscaping elements, including the original enclosing wall, have been lost, but the reflecting pool has been re-opened and restored, and what is believed to be an original tree survives in the courtyard. The Visitors Information Center's pinwheeling plan with its carefully considered views represents the only remaining illustration of Yeon's approach to site design at an urban location. The design shows aspects of both Northwest Regionalism and of the International Style, and was almost immediately widely influential even outside the Pacific Northwest. The building is listed as a local landmark by the City of Portland, is on the City's Historic Resource Inventory, and is listed on the State of Oregon Inventory of Historic Properties.

## HISTORY

*(Chronological, descriptive history of the property from its construction through at least the historic period - preferably to the present)*

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph The Visitors Information Center in Portland, Oregon, is eligible statewide for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C, Architecture, as an example of the work of recognized master architect John Yeon. The period of significance is 1948, the date the building was constructed. Yeon, one of Oregon's most famous architects, is known as a pioneer of the Northwest Regional style of architecture. His Information Center is his only non-residential building still in existence, and was included as one of only 43 buildings in the Museum of Modern Art's prestigious 1953 "Built in U.S.A.: Post-War Architecture" exhibit, along with works by Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Philip Johnson, and Richard Neutra. Yeon's deep love for the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest inspired his multi-disciplinary style of design, where the outside views were carefully framed in an orchestrated series of experiences. The Visitors Information Center shows Yeon's innovative design approach in its response to its uniquely urban site conditions, in its wall systems and materials, and in its landscaping. The building, which exhibits aspects of both International Style and Northwest Regional Style architecture, is widely considered to be one of John Yeon's finest works. Narrative Statement of Significance The Visitors Information Center is architecturally significant, under Criterion C, as a work of a master architect. It represents one end of the range of John Yeon's work as the only International Style building he designed, albeit with influences from the related Northwest Regional Style of architecture. The design is highly abstract and functional, yet reflects a warmth and a strong connection to its site, reflecting the early postwar context of the International Style in the United States. The building is also Yeon's only public structure, and the only building he designed for a truly urban site. The Visitors Information Center's International-Style credentials can be seen in its flat roofs, its adherence to a strict modularity, and in its use of glass for entire walls rather than for discrete openings. Its most significant Modernist characteristic is its "inside-out" design, in which the exterior form and appearance are expressions of the functional interior spaces of the building. Regional style characteristics, however, are also seen in Yeon's self-developed wall systems for the building, which are notable for several reasons. First, the walls are finished in exterior plywood, a very new (and regionally developed) building material at this time, and second, the walls include ventilators, where a fixed window is used in combination with a louver for air circulation. Yeon may have been the originator of the ventilator idea, which was adopted by many architects working in the modern idiom within the region. The Visitors Information Center is a deceptively simple building illustrating Yeon's skillful and innovative approach to design even at a difficult, urban site. The Visitors Information Center originally included a highly innovative landscaping design. Though a few of the original elements are extant, most have been lost. It is worth mentioning, however, that the landscaping design for the building likely would have been eligible for nomination on its own merits as a significant work of a master Landscape Architect, at very least at a statewide level. Early Influences and Family History John Yeon is

often cited as Oregon's most influential native architect. He grew up in Portland, exposed to the wood products industry, architectural design, and the natural landscape in Oregon from his earliest years. His father, John Baptiste Yeon, was a French-Canadian entrepreneur and his mother, Mary Elizabeth Mock, came from a privileged Portland family. John B. Yeon was born in 1865 and immigrated to the Oregon Coast from Canada in 1885 where he found work in a lumber mill. By saving his money, the elder Yeon was able to start his own logging company and went on to become quite successful. By the time the young John Yeon was born in 1910, his father had relocated inland to Portland where he invested in real estate and development. In addition to his business interests, John B. Yeon also had a strong commitment to community service, the environment, and good architectural design. John B. Yeon served as Multnomah County's first Roadmaster and was highly influential in the Columbia River Highway project, which he agreed to do for a personal profit of only \$1 per year. As part of the massive project, spanning from 1913 to 1922, John B. Yeon oversaw the construction of the Vista House at Crown Point State Park in the Columbia Gorge, now one of Oregon's most famous landmarks and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. His son John Yeon would later recall that the famous Vista House was not easy to obtain funding for because politicians deemed such a building to have "no purpose," though it was conceived to be both a scenic viewpoint and essentially Oregon's first roadside rest area. John B. Yeon worked hard to ensure that the path of the highway blended into the natural environment of the valley, formed in an ancient glacial flood. The elder Yeon is commemorated by a namesake State Park located off the Columbia River Historic Highway near Multnomah Falls. His son shared his father's passion for the area, and became a leader in the effort to create the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area in the early 1980s. The elder John Yeon's interest in architecture extended to the urban environment as well. The Yeon Building is located at 522 SW Fifth Avenue in downtown Portland, and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994. The building was contracted to be the headquarters of the John B. Yeon Company, and it capitalized on the demand for downtown office space in the growing city. Again the aesthetic of Yeon's father is apparent. Rather than use a local architect, John B. Yeon sought out the services of a renowned San Francisco firm, Reid and Reid, best known for its work on the Hotel del Coronado in San Diego. Completed in 1911, the Yeon Building was fifteen stories tall, making it the tallest building in the state at that time. The Yeon Building was then considered by many to be Oregon's first "sky scraper" and a triumph in architectural design for the city of Portland. John Baptiste Yeon's interest in the natural environment, architecture, and his experience in the lumber and development industries had a profound influence on his son's developing aesthetic. As a child John Yeon traveled with his father on business, with trips to the Columbia Gorge during the building of the Columbia River Highway or to the Oregon Coast. These forays into the Oregon wilderness gave Yeon an intimate appreciation for the natural beauty and ecology of the Pacific Northwest. His father's experience in the lumber and development industry also gave him an intimate knowledge of wood products and building design, which he would later draw upon to develop the innovative products and designs that he incorporated into his architecture. The Northwest Regional Style of architecture, of which he is widely cited as an originator, is most characterized by its relationship to the natural environment of the Pacific Northwest and the use of wood. Thus an appreciation for Yeon's childhood is essential to understanding just how profound his impact on the Northwest Regional Style truly was. John Yeon developed knowledge of indigenous building materials and their applications within the context of the rugged Pacific Northwest, thus resulting in his unique design sensibility. The Architectural Development and Career of John Yeon John Yeon had a broad and largely self-taught artistic talent, exploring the relationship between the built and the natural landscapes not only through architecture, but also art history and preservation, landscape architecture, interior design, and art. Yeon's early education included a year at the Moran School, a private preparatory school in Washington State, where he recalled building miniature theaters complete with set changes. Subsequently, he attended the Allen Preparatory School in Portland for three years, and then spent a year at the Culver Military Academy in Indiana. Yeon began illustrating articles for the school literary magazine while attending Culver, and also while there was given the chance to go to Europe for the first time. In 1928, when he was 17 or 18, he toured Scandinavia, England, Germany, and France. He was most impressed by Stockholm and had, by that time, developed a passion for architecture. For some years during Yeon's teens, he had been interested in his father's Mocks Crest development in Portland, watching the houses in design and later in construction. Also during his teen years, he began working as a summer office boy in prominent Portland architectural offices; first for A.E. Doyle and later for Herman Brookman. At Doyle's office, John Yeon met Harry Wentz, who was a friend and contemporary of Doyle's. Yeon began attending Harry Wentz's composition class at the Portland Art Museum and also took life drawing at night. Wentz befriended the younger man, and they often took trips together to paint wildflowers in the Columbia River Gorge. Pietro Belluschi, who was also working in Doyle's office, was similarly impressed with Harry Wentz and with Wentz's studio cottage on the side of Mt. Neahkanie on the Oregon coast. The studio, designed by Doyle in 1916, provided inspiration to Belluschi and Yeon, and represented for both architects the idea of holistically integrating the entire composition of house and site. Returning from his Culver trip to Europe, John Yeon was accepted at Stanford, but his studies there were to end with the news that his father had died in 1929. He spent some time in New York City, working for the architectural office of DeYoung, Moscovitz, and Rosenberg and taking sporadic evening classes at Columbia University. In 1930, he traveled again to Europe, this time with his mother, two brothers, and his sister. They went to the Exposition in Stockholm, where the new International Style of architecture was emerging, led in Sweden by the modernist architect Erik Gunnar Asplund. Yeon returned to Oregon at about the time Oregon elected Julius Meier as governor. John Yeon's father had been a friend of Meier's, and the two men had worked together on the Columbia River Highway project for almost a decade. Although only twenty-one, John Yeon became immediately involved in a land conservation effort. There were plans to build a dance hall atop Chapman Point, at Ecola State Park on the coast of Oregon, and Yeon instead borrowed against a life insurance policy and purchased the land, preventing its development. That same year, Meier appointed John Yeon to the state's first Park Commission. Yeon's first opportunity to blend his experiences and design aesthetic was a modest commission to build a garden for his mother's Portland home. Built in 1933, the garden utilized Roman brick walls and grillwork set into a circular design that predates Frank Lloyd Wright's "circular" architecture. Considered to be "the beginning of contemporary landscape design" in Oregon, it was widely published and had a broad influence on garden design across America. Much of this early landscape design has been lost. In 1935, Yeon executed a number of unsolicited designs for a ski lodge/hotel on Mt. Hood. His site choice was shaped by his own experiences skiing and mountaineering on Mt. Hood. "My hotel...was designed specifically for that ridge and designed so that the snow would blow off of it and land in the canyon," Yeon explained. Timberline Lodge was ultimately built as a WPA project during the Great Depression, a far larger project than Yeon had advocated. Yeon believed that the site chosen was a mistake, being in a hollow where winter snow drifts regularly extend far up the sides of the building. Yeon was only 25 at the time of his Timberline Lodge studies, but his characteristic sensitivity to siting concerns was already evident. It was not until 1937 that Yeon received his first professional commission, one which would propel him to international fame and contribute to the creation of a new architectural movement. While serving as a State Parks Commissioner Yeon had the opportunity to meet fellow Commissioner Aubrey Watzek, who was in the process of soliciting proposals to build his new house. Yeon initially referred Watzek to his former employer AE Doyle and Associates, where Yeon's colleague, Pietro Belluschi, had assumed control. Although not a licensed architect, Yeon had already proposed the home's ultimate location in Portland's West Hills and then took the initiative to design and model a house for consideration without being asked. After rejecting other designs, including one by Belluschi, Watzek eventually selected Yeon's proposal. John Yeon moved into the offices of AE Doyle and Associates on January 1st 1937, and completed the Watzek house that year. Yeon was responsible for the entire project including the concept, placement, landscape design (with native plants) and the interior design – including much of the furniture. The building makes use of a variety of natural wood products, emphasizes natural light, and shows strong Scandinavian and Asian design influences. An "ingenious concept of the floor plan was an enclosed courtyard and pool and both a north-south axis that terminated at a dining room window looking into virgin woodland and a west-east axis that terminated with Mt. Hood centered on the living room window." The building immediately attracted the attention of the architectural profession; however, Yeon's position as an unlicensed architect and informal employee working at AE Doyle and Associates led to confusion over credit for the design. Belluschi originally cited the Watzek House as an AE Doyle & Associates project without naming Yeon as its independent designer. Eventually, sole credit for the Watzek House was awarded to John Yeon. The Watzek house was immediately recognized as a hallmark of a new style of architectural design, and was internationally published. John McAndrew, the head of the architecture department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, was sufficiently impressed with the design to include it in the 1938 Art In Our Time exhibit, next to Frank Lloyd Wright's "Falling Water." Yeon's unique and innovative design was one of the first to be called the Northwest Regional style. The house is listed on the National Register under Criterion C, for architecture. Following the completion of the Watzek house, the general contractor, Burt Smith, asked Yeon to design a group of nine small houses to be constructed and then offered for sale. "The resulting structures, built in 1938-39, show Yeon at his most creative, and perhaps for the first time, a 'systems approach' was used in the design of a single family house." Yeon utilized an economical modular design for these houses, with plywood panels on two- or four-foot centers between exterior wooden mullions. The effect has been compared to Japanese screens, perhaps an influence from Yeon's ongoing studies of Western and Oriental art. In almost all of his following single-residence commissions, Yeon included pergolas and, in the words of Bosker and Lencek, "external passages that brought the ethereal naturescapes of Japanese screens to life." One of these modular houses is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as "John Yeon Speculative House," under Criterion C. Yeon's floor plans exhibit his characteristic light touch with the enclosure of space, using several solid or enclosed blocks placed around a visually open central area. The central glass enclosure punctuated by enclosed blocks of rooms appears in most of his work, and Yeon explained the ideas behind this central space in a 1954 magazine interview. "If the air were solidified and the walls stripped away, the solid would have a shape that is pleasing to me... an asymmetrical cubic composition which is neither static nor restless, suggestive of movement, but in repose." These spatial compositions at the heart of each floor plan were carefully created to take advantage of the view opportunities for each specific site. Between 1946 and 1953, Yeon's work had graced the cover of national architectural publications four times. However, by the mid-1950's, Yeon had moved away from residential architecture and became involved in designing galleries. He produced designs for the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, the San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts, and the Portland Art Museum. He also devoted increasing amounts of time to conservation efforts and to ecological restoration in the Columbia Gorge, at the coast, and in Portland. Despite never having been licensed as a professional architect, Yeon in 1955 became the second winner of the Arnold W. Brunner Memorial Prize for Architecture by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, joining an elite group that has since come to include Gordon Bunshaft, Renzo Piano, Jean Nouvel, and Frank Gehry. In 1977, the University of Oregon awarded Yeon the Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the cultural development of Oregon society. In 1978, he was made an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects. Yeon's achievements in architecture and conservation survived his death in 1994 at the age of 83 and continue to shape future generations of architects. Yeon beneficiary and long time friend Richard Louis Brown arranged a substantial gift of properties to the University of Oregon's School of Architecture and Allied Arts. These properties include Yeon's landscape architecture preserve in the Columbia Gorge called "The Shire" and his famed Watzek House. The University of Oregon has used the endowment from the Yeon estate to establish the John Yeon Center for Architectural Studies, the John Yeon Lecture Series featuring prominent guest architects, and the John Yeon Graduate Research Fellowship. The International Style and the Northwest Regional Style The term

“International Style” originally was applied to a 1932 Museum of Modern Art exhibition of art and architecture by the curators, Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip C. Johnson. Hitchcock and Johnson provided a definition of this emerging style, based on three characteristics: “emphasis upon volume- space enclosed by thin planes or surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and lastly, dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions, as opposed to applied ornament.” European and American “International Style” buildings were reflecting advances in architectural engineering, with the use of larger beams and columns to free the walls of buildings from their traditional structural constraints, thus allowing for the use of large panes of glass. The development of the International Style of Architecture followed these principles in both Europe and in the U.S., but regional variants began to appear as early as the late 1930’s. At this time, the Northwest Regional Style began to be recognized by the architectural establishment of America’s East Coast through a small but impressive number of uniquely modern houses making headlines in Oregon and Washington. Like all regional movements, one of the defining characteristics of the Northwest Regional Style was the use of the area’s abundant local resources, timber in this case, as a building material. In the Pacific Northwest, structural supports were often timber, rather than the more machined and industrial concrete and steel systems used in Europe and on the East Coast. In deference to the majestic scenery of the Pacific Northwest, the designs of the buildings themselves were shaped by bringing the “outside in” with large glass windows and walls oriented toward views of mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, etc. and by paying particular attention to zones that mediated between exterior and interior. The use of unfinished and unpainted (or using colors taken from the hues of the natural landscape) wood-frame construction, siding, and roofing, asymmetrical facades, low silhouettes, and open floor plans to take advantage of natural light marked the Northwest Regional Style as a manifestation of not only regionally prevalent materials, but the beauty of the regional environment as well. The Northwest Regional Style is most often associated with residential projects. Yeon is frequently cited along with Italian-born architect, Pietro Belluschi, as one of the primary inventors of the Northwest Regional Style. Belluschi, formally educated as an engineer, had immigrated to Portland and begun to establish himself as an architect through projects like the Portland Art Museum (1932). Though both Yeon and Belluschi were influential in the spread of the Northwest Regional style, Belluschi’s work did not exhibit the full development of the Northwest Regional style until after the success of Yeon’s Watzek House. The controversy over the credit for the Watzek House design created a competitive relationship between Belluschi and Yeon. While Yeon lived a fairly reclusive lifestyle and would only see about eighteen of his building designs completed in his life, Belluschi pursued an illustrious career, designing high-profile commercial projects, churches, and residences, and serving as the Dean of Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1951-1965. As a result, Belluschi is more frequently cited in reference to the Northwest Regional Style. Some of Belluschi’s most famous residential buildings like the Sutor House (1938) and Platt House (1941) share similarities to Yeon’s Watzek House and Speculative Houses. Ralph T. Coe, director of the Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas wrote of Yeon in 1977 that “this designer’s role in the history of twentieth-century American architecture has been somewhat obscured by the very quiet format in which he prefers to practice, as well as by the fact that some of his most important work was done quite a number of years ago.” According to Yeon’s friend and colleague Joseph Esherick, who practiced architecture in the San Francisco area, John Yeon was disliked by some of the more established Portland architects at the time, due not only to his immense talent (and lack of formal credentials) but also because he was reclusive by nature, preferring to remain outside of the local social circles. Despite Yeon’s detractors and the limited number of commissions he received, it was arguably Yeon’s freedom from existing paradigms that allowed his imagination to manifest itself in exiting new designs like the Watzek House and Speculative House series, which came to define the Northwest Regional Style. Coe also observed, in 1977, that the Visitors Information Center “in spite of the insults which have been done to it through misunderstandings of its original architectural integrity, is as appropriate a building to look at today- (providing it is properly restored) as it was when built and included in the Museum of Modern Art’s ‘Built in U.S.A.: Post-War Architecture’ exhibition.” The Portland Visitors Information Center During WWII, John Yeon’s architectural career in Oregon had been briefly interrupted while he served in North Africa. His carefully crafted and holistic style continued after his return from the war in a number of residential designs. Up until the late 1940’s, Yeon’s work had been limited to residences, but Yeon was approached with two non-residential building commissions at about the same period of time in 1947. One of these projects, for the Portland Garden Club, was never built. Yeon’s only public building, and the only commission designed for an urban setting, was to be a Visitors Information Center for the City of Portland. The Portland Chamber of Commerce had, for some years prior to 1947, desired a new “guest information” center where visitors might find information promoting Portland and the surrounding region. In 1945, under Chamber president Frank McCaslin, a visitor’s service committee was formed. A special fund of \$75,000 was raised at that time in order to prepare for what was expected to be a post-war boom in tourism. The Chamber of Commerce asked Yeon to design a log structure, in order to highlight Oregon’s robust timber industry. However, the design Yeon presented to the Chamber of Commerce was a spare, exquisitely considered modernist structure “as close to pure abstraction as a functioning building can get.” The building design was finalized by early August 1947, not without some struggle. In deference to the mighty timber industry, though, a cutting from a 16-foot Sitka spruce was mounted outside the building at the southwest corner. The location chosen for the new tourist center was on the Portland waterfront downtown, on a tough site next to a two-block-long building and immediately off Harbor Drive, the freeway along the west side of the Willamette River. (See photo, figure 14). The site did have the advantage of being very visible, especially to those travelling by car. At the groundbreaking ceremony for the building in early January 1948, the new Chamber of Commerce president Hillman Lueddemann noted that the site would be extremely convenient, as one of the main entryways to the City when the approaches to the Steel Bridge and the planned extensions of Harbor Drive were completed. Both the State Highway Department and the City of Portland donated land for the project. Because Yeon was not a registered architect, he needed a professional to stamp the drawings. The architectural office of Wick, Hilgers, and Scott of Portland was asked to serve as architects of record on the project. Yeon may have known Clarence (“Casey”) Wick from the office of DeYoung, Moscovitz and Rosenberg in New York, where Wick and Yeon both worked for a brief time in 1930. Wick’s partnership with Hilgers and Scott was formed in 1941, though Scott later left the firm in 1945. There is no evidence that Yeon’s design was a collaboration with the firm, however. The building cost less than the original estimate, due to donations of labor and materials. The contractor, L. H. Hoffman of Portland, donated his services free of charge. The overall final cost was pegged at \$65,000.00. The 1948 design of the building used many of the same principles Yeon had been developing in his residential work, with a modular wall system incorporating glass, louvered ventilation panels and painted plywood panels. The plan is not simply a group of several enclosed blocks placed around a visually open central area, but forms a pinwheel composition. Three of these blocks- housing staff offices, exhibits and rest rooms- are drawn into one large group around a central lobby. The fourth block, for garden equipment, anchors the north end of the outdoor walled garden. For Yeon, the use of such an arrangement gave the building a sense of movement and an active engagement to the site. Yeon framed the views out from the Visitors Center main space, allowing to the south a tight view midblock (but blocking most of the freeway itself) towards what was then a grassy berm extending up to the Hawthorne Bridge approach. To the west was another focused glimpse; this time of the more urban streetscape towards downtown Portland. Because of the comparatively overwhelming size of the building to the north, the old Public Market structure, Yeon created a walled garden and reflecting pond at this end, where one could look out into a calm, green environment. Finally, where most buildings along the Willamette River at this time did not open up to the waterfront, Yeon’s east façade offers a multitude of views of the water and of Mt. Hood beyond the Harbor Drive highway, framed by a lushly planted pergola. The Information Center “would bring the Japanese screen motif to downtown Portland. In spaces defined by the columned pergola, Yeon framed a series of views- a panorama of screens from urban life- onto the Willamette River.” It is interesting to note that Yeon’s commitment to his principles of integrated site design was perhaps tested by the location offered for the Visitors Information Center, and was shaped by International-Style principles of abstraction and utilitarianism. The structure is conceived from the inside out, so that the exterior shape reflects the interior structure and layout. Still, Yeon’s design was firmly tied to and shaped by the specifics of the site and its environment, an approach that was perhaps more American than European in the development of the Modernist movement. Yeon’s original design for the landscaping of the Visitors Information Center would be of sufficient importance to nominate under its own merits, if the scheme had been retained. The landscaping supported his principles of integrated site design, and was described in glowing terms by Architectural Forum magazine, “Hardy native trees and shrubs will surround the building and its parking area. The long pergola will support a magnificent display of climbing roses- the official state flower. Protected on all sides- by the pergola, the building, and a hedge of bamboo trees which will be set along the fence- the interior court around the pool will blossom forth with exotic species of flowers.” However, this scheme was never fully carried out. “In 1948 at the time of its construction,” noted Wallace Kay Huntington, “the retail nurseries in the Northwest carried few, if any, native plants and Yeon’s choice of vine maple, madrone, salal and Oregon grape was an innovative planting scheme- the first public use of such materials in Oregon.” Soon after its completion, the building was re-landscaped by volunteers from the Men’s Garden Club, who believed roses to be more appropriate than Yeon’s native plantings. The courtyard itself, excepting one tree and the original lily pond, was later paved over. Yeon’s design for the Visitors Information Center reveals the strong influence of the International Style- indeed, stronger than in any of his other built work. The Visitors Center is of wood-frame construction, with a flat roof. The wall framing studs are expressed on the exterior, on a strict three-foot module. The field between the vertical studs is trimmed out with smaller wood slats, and is infilled with glazing, exterior-grade plywood, fixed screened wood louvers, or a combination of these three. Color was used to delineate the architectural elements: a dark blue color (referred to as Yeon blue by its prevalence in his work) on the panels, wood trim in a pale grey-green, a blue-black on the exposed ends of the studs, and wine-red on the doors. No other ornament, aside from the delineation of structure, is used either outside or inside the building. Although the wall systems and the color scheme itself (derived from “natural” sources) are in many ways “Northwest Regional” in style, the use of the very strict grid in the building’s layout is an attribute of the International Style, as is the meticulous employment of color to show structural function. The flat roof, another characteristic of the International Style, was not used in any of Yeon’s other built designs. While his active and engaged response to the specific site is not necessarily an attribute of the early European Modern movement, it is evident in the work of other American architects working the Modern style in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. For instance, Frank Lloyd Wright’s “organic” expression of unity bet

## RESEARCH INFORMATION

✓ Title Records	Census Records	✓ Property Tax Records	✓ Local Histories
✓ Sanborn Maps	✓ Biographical Sources	✓ SHPO Files	Interviews
Obituaries	✓ Newspapers	State Archives	✓ Historic Photographs
City Directories	Building Permits	State Library	



**Local Library:** Multnomah County Library  
**Historical Society:** Oregon Historical Society

**University Library:**  
**Other Respository:**

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