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Rooftop roundtable yields tremors, revelations

Portland Business Journal - by [Brian J. Back](#) Business Journal Staff Writer

In welcoming visionary-author Stewart Brand to town, a handful of Portlanders played the role of futuristic soothsayers Wednesday atop the Columbia Square Building while an earthquake rattled the Northwest.

Brand, founder of the **Global Business Network** and the Whole Earth Catalogue, was in town to discuss at First Congregational Church the ideas behind his latest book. His Wednesday evening lecture was part of Institute for the Northwest's Environment Matters speaker series.

IFN founder Peter Schoonmaker organized an impromptu gathering for Brand Wednesday morning in the offices of Melvin Mark Cos. The forum welcomed Ethan Seltzer, director of the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies; Thor Hinkley, Portland General Electric's renewable energy director; Allied Works architect Brad Klopfil; Lisa Miles, newly hired landscape architect for Ashforth Pacific Inc.; Melvin Mark Cos. CEO Jim Mark; and The Business Journal.

Enjoying Portland's fifth straight day of clear blue skies and panoramic views of Mount Hood, Mount St. Helens and Mount Adams, the group convened on the rooftop of the Columbia Square Building to muse about the city's past, present and future.

Moments after Brand was briefed about Portland's geographic sense of place, an earthquake struck 140 miles to the north and caused the Columbia Square Building to sway and swagger on its foundation.

A bit on Brand

Brand's latest book, "The Clock of the Long Now," describes a computer designer's plight to build the world's slowest computer--a 10,000-year-old clock. It asks readers to consider their present actions as part of a time continuum stretching both backward and forward.

Brand's latest book reframes the nature of responsibility and addresses the role of technology, cities and social policy over the next 10, 100 or even 10,000 years. According to sustainability pioneer Paul Hawken, the book is an "elixir for jittery, time-starved minds."

Thinking of Portland with a 10,000-year clock is a "perfectly reasonable thing to do," Brand said. "After all, cities are our longest lasting institutions."

Brand first gained notoriety in 1966, after conceiving and selling buttons that read, "Why Haven't We Seen a Photograph of the Whole Earth Yet?" According to legend, the move accelerated NASA's photography sophistication during the Apollo program.

Two days before Earth Day in 1970, Brand founded the Whole Earth Catalogue. In 1984, he founded the WELL (Whole Earth `Lectronic Link), a Bay Area teleconference system, which some say foreshadowed the wired world of the web.

Four years later, Brand co-founded the Global Business Network, which explores global futures and strategies for multinational corporations such as of IBM, Disney/ABC, Kodak, Lucent, Daimler-Benz and Monsanto.

Brand also wrote "The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT" (1987) and "How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built" (1994).

Tips for the thought jar

Rather than inviting higher-profile politicians and developers, Schoonmaker said he preferred Wednesday's group because of its flexibility to think beyond immediate issues and to speak beyond political rhetoric.

As the morning progressed, a slew of ideas about Portland came to the surface:

- Peering over a map of the Willamette Valley, the group discussed the role of Portland's outlying areas, particularly Beaverton and Vancouver.

Seltzer said he hopes Beaverton will grow into a city as large as Portland and embrace the idea of a pedestrian-friendly downtown. A lot of rethinking and redevelopment will be necessary to realize that future.

Addressing Vancouver's infrastructure problems, Brand noted that "growth doesn't pay for itself."

- Seltzer rattled off a bevy of thought-provoking stats, including: Vancouver takes in 18 percent of the Portland metro area; and 44 percent of Portlanders have at least a four-year degree or more.

- While discussing philanthropy, Brand characterized the new breed of young, wealthy tech entrepreneurs:

"They like to be jazzed," he said. "They want to do cool engineering, they're comfortable thinking long term and they want to go to Mars."

- When asked about the kudos his design of the Wieden+Kennedy Building has garnered, Klopfil said "it was all common sense."

Why, then, aren't more cutting-edge, energy-efficient buildings gracing the Portland skyline?

"I guess sometimes people just don't think about it," he said.

Klopfil also offered some interesting observations about The Brewery Blocks: specifically, that it's uncommon to have just one firm design several contiguous blocks; and that, were it not for market fears, the overall design could have been a little more progressive than it's being touted as.

- How do you consider a 100- or 1,000-year life for a building when the immediacy of markets steer development? That's a good question, everyone agreed.

Brand noted the idea of an evolutionary building design--one that can be disassembled and reassembled for present needs but dynamic enough to have a history.

- Klopfil sparred with Seltzer on which was better for Portland: small blocks or large blocks. The debate was friendly but the opinions were completely polarized--Klopfil thinks the blocks should be large; Seltzer thinks a lot of Portland's planning success is because the blocks are small.

- Brand said environmental groups like Ecotrust possess the ability to scope a 1,000-year plain, mainly because the forests it lobbies for can have 1,000-year lifespans. However, most forests that old didn't survive the last 200 years.

'A draught of vivid life'

Standing on top of the Columbia Square Building, surveying the fir-topped hills and snow-capped mountains in the distance and discussing Portland's time continuum, I couldn't help but think of Timothy Egan's "The Good Rain."

In his book, Egan retraces the steps of Puritan-turned-naturalist Theodore Winthrop, who visited the virgin Pacific Northwest in 1853. Among Winthrop's observations:

"These Oregon people, in a climate where being is bliss--where every breath is a draught of vivid life--these Oregon people, carrying to a newer and grander New England of the West a full growth of the American Idea ... will elaborate new systems of thought and life," he wrote.

"New systems of thought and life?" Egan countered. "Is that what's clogging the freeways of the Puget Sound megalopolis, the Willamette Valley and the urban forest above the Fraser River?"

"The regional icons--salmon and trees and mountains and water--spring from the elements," he went on. "If people here become too far removed from those basic sources of life, then they lose the bond to a better world."

And the clock ticks on.

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