

**Capitol Hill's Modern Apartment Buildings:  
An Investigation in the Dingbat Typology**

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Modern apartment buildings in Seattle are distinct entities. The use of the word “modern” suggests buildings that have come out of a tradition of the International Style and were built in the middle of the Twentieth Century. This term can also encompass a larger period of time, to include such residential styles like the bungalow and craftsman. This investigation will apply the term “modern” in the narrower sense.

“Modern” architecture is not often talked about in the field of preservation. Discussing architecture from our recent past can be challenging without the distance of time to help one make evaluations. Challenges also arise around the notion of preservation of Modern architecture because the general public does not often appreciate this style. The vocabulary used to discuss Modern buildings has not been well established. The apartment type is often an overlooked subject matter as well. Analyzing these two under examined elements has resulted in a paper that relies heavily on first hand fieldwork and analysis. The modern

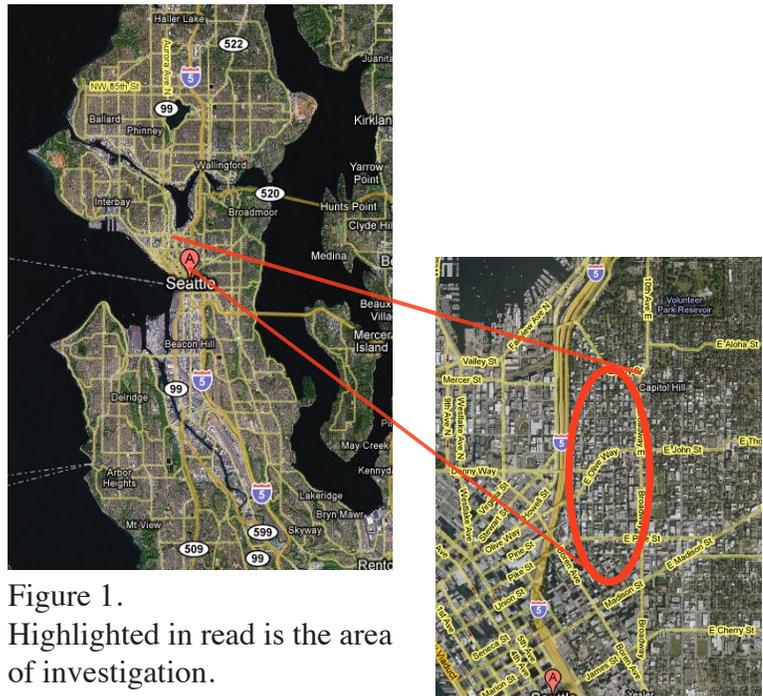


Figure 1. Highlighted in red is the area of investigation.

apartment structures in Seattle will be compared to other modern apartment buildings in California as well as Victor Steinbrueck’s interpretation of the typical modern apartment building in Seattle.

The methodology used in this paper can be broken into two sections. The first section will discuss the process of inventory while the second section will be an analysis of this data as well as a comparison with existing typologies of modern apartment buildings. The area of this investigation is western Capitol Hill (figure 1), bounded on the north by Roy Street and to the south by Union Street. The western boundary of the area is I-5 and the eastern end is Broadway. This portion of Capitol Hill is closest to Downtown and the Eastlake neighborhood. This area was chosen because other parts of Capitol Hill were developed during an earlier era of the streetcar in the 1920s and this area seems to

have been influenced by development in the middle of the Twentieth Century. This issue will be discussed further in the mapping of apartment construction dates.

### INVENTORY INVESTIGATION

The inventory stage of the investigation begun with the application of information from King County maps. The online King County Parcel Viewer was consulted for all of the plots in the researched zone (Appendix A). Date of construction could be found for every parcel and this was used to determine where the buildings from the 1950s to 1970s were located in Capitol Hill. This web site also provides information on the structural material, the number of units in each apartment, the current owner, the building square footage as well as the number of stories.

I first mapped the apartment buildings according to their date (Figure 2), in the hopes of finding a pattern of development. Generally, more apartments were found north of Olive Way. All of the apartments built in the 1970s were also to the north. But it does not seem that specific dates correspond to specific sections of

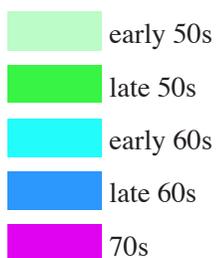


Figure 2.  
Apartment buildings mapped according to date of construction.

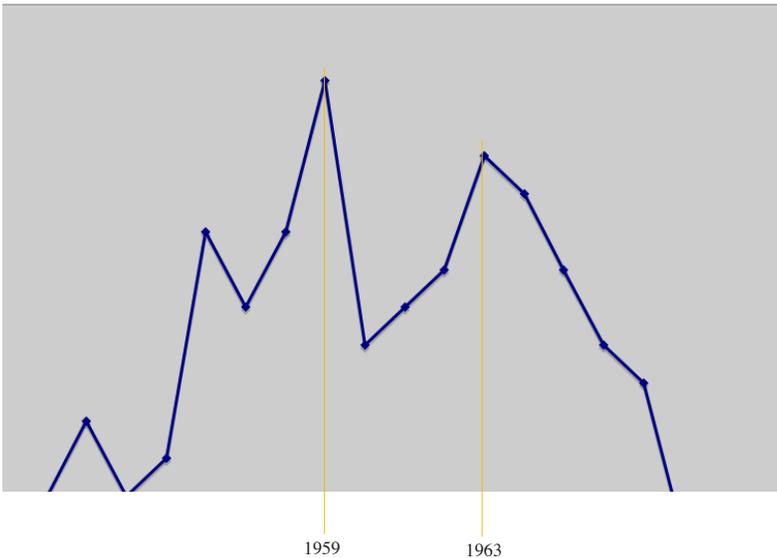


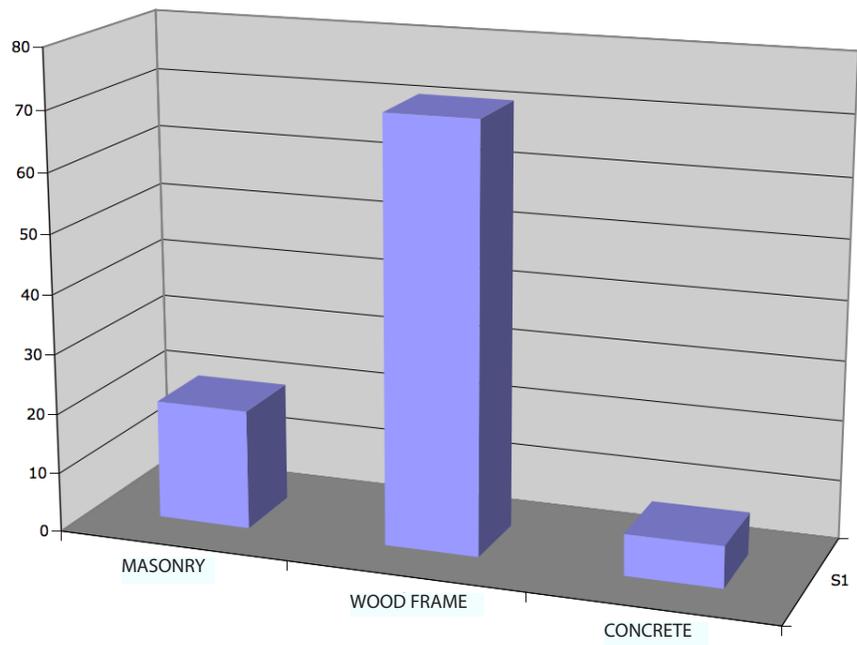
Figure 3.  
 Chart of apartment building's date of construction. The x-axis indicates the year of construction while the y-axis indicates the number of apartment buildings with this condition. (Chart created by author with information provided by King County Parcel Viewer)

It could be hypothesized that the spike in 1959 and in 1963 (Figure 3) were affected by the Fair. In 1959, the rise in apartments could have been a response to the expectation of an increased population due to the World's Fair, while the spike in 1963 could be a result of an economic boost as a result of the revenue from the Fair.

This inventory of data from the King County maps lead to some initial understanding of these apartments. The first had to do with materiality (Figure 4). According to the information gathered, the majority of the structures are stick-built construction. Masonry and concrete building constructions

block development. Areas along major routes of traffic were examined. Olive Way does not seem to be developed extensively during this period although the area near I-5 is developed almost entirely in this period. There is no residential development along Broadway Avenue. The dates of construction of the I-5 highway fall within the period of inquiry. The project was started in 1952 and was completed in 1967. Another major event during this period was the Seattle World's Fair in 1962. It could be

Figure 4.  
 Chart of apartment building structural material. The x-axis indicates the material while the y-axis indicates the number of apartment buildings with this condition. (Chart created by author with information provided by King County Parcel Viewer)



were less popular. The use of stick built construction suggests that the buildings might have been built with relatively unskilled labor. This material is also cheaper to build and is more susceptible to effects of time and weathering than concrete or masonry.

The other element that became clear about these apartment buildings after this initial inventory was the building's height. The King County map provided information about the number of stories for each structure.

When this information was charted (Figure 5) the typical size can be clearly understood. The chart illustrates that most structures are between two and four stories in height. The structures that are above nine stories in height were built in the 1970s and will not be examined in this analysis.

### *ESTABLISHED TYPOLOGIES*

Two types of sources were consulted to understand apartment buildings from this period. Victor Steinbrueck's book, Seattle Cityscape, was helpful to address the greater context of Seattle during this period. It also outlined other types of existing apartment housing stock in the city. Steinbrueck is not particularly fond of modern apartment buildings. He only mentions two examples of apartments from this era which he believes to be well done. He cites University Hospital Apartments in the University District completed in 1962 by Bassetti and Morse. He also notes Bumgardner's Allison Apartments in Beacon Hill. Both of these examples are not in Capitol Hill. Otherwise Steinbrueck is discouraged about Modern apartment buildings. He creates his own type, calling it a "Pigeon Hole" (figure 6).

The main elements of the Pigeon Hole described by Steinbrueck are the large view windows and the open outside corridors. Steinbrueck argues that this combination of elements eliminates the

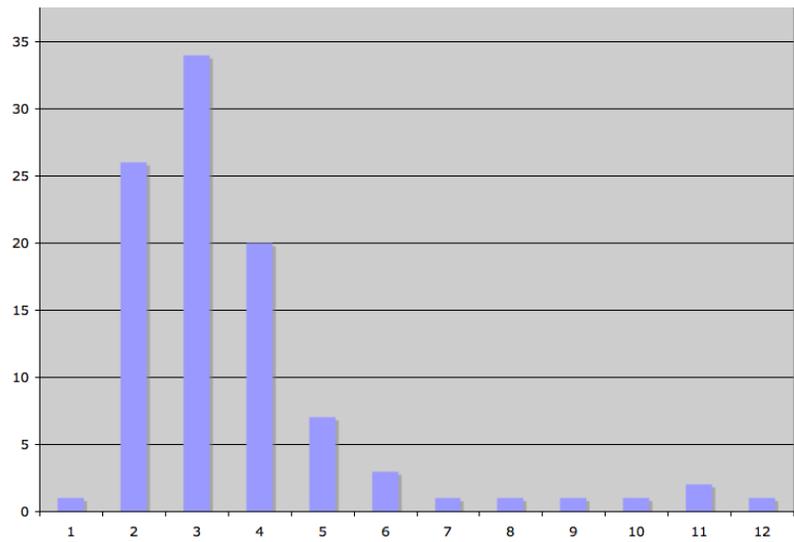


Figure 5. Chart of the apartment building's number of stories. The x-axis indicates the number of stories while the y-axis indicates the number of apartment buildings with this condition. (Chart created by author with information provided by King County Parcel Viewer)

privacy essential to dwelling. In the book he suggests that “most tenants close their blinds and look for another apartment when their lease runs out” due to this lack of privacy. Steinbrueck’s sketch (Figure 4), illustrative of the Pigeon Hole, is at a scale which is completely different from almost all the apartments examined. The building appears to be five stories and has a street presence with a frontal open air corridor. This type does not appear in many of the examples found in the investigated zone.



Figure 6. Sketch of a “pigeon hole” (Steinbrueck)

The other typology looked into through literary research is the “Dingbat.” This apartment type was researched through a short book on the type in Los Angeles (Figure 7) as well as through articles and internet sources which include other regions such as San Diego, Seattle, and Portland. Deegan describes the term as having “... emerged in architectural circles in recent years as a label for inexpensive apartment complexes shaped like big



Figure 7. L.A. Dingbat Apartment (Piercy)

square boxes.” Piercy agrees with this formal definition but also emphasizes the characteristic feature of the carport, created through elevating the box on piloti. Piercy describes a “dingbat” as “a purist International style fused with a generous helping of Googie, some of them bearing a more than passing resemblance to Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye.”

Frost furthers this connection to automobile culture by saying that this first level space, “pay[s] homage to the automobile by giving it primacy” (Frost). Another element of

the LA dingbat is the iconic signage and names (Figure 8). These playful names conjure up the exotic and commercial culture of the period. Color is another exceptional element in the LA dingbat examples. This feature is often part of what is disliked about the Dingbat.

Not only is it different looking from more traditional apartment buildings, but the vibrant colors make it stick out. Materials that are typically used for the treatment of the facades are concrete and stucco. This can be compared with the data collected from the King County



Figure 8. Dingbat Apartment Signage (Piercy)

Map Collection suggesting a greater use of wood for construction in Seattle. Since stucco is typically a poor exterior treatment for a rainy climate, an adaptation had to be made to fit the Seattle climate.

### *BUILDING ANALYSIS THROUGH COMPARISON*

After the initial mapping, further inventory was undertaken through site photographs (Appendix B). This exercise was crucial in being able to investigate the elements typical to the “Dingbat” and “pigeon hole” apartment styles. Although over 100 buildings were inventoried, only a few will be discussed as illustrative of the group. I will not delve into the 1970s projects which were of another scale and should be reviewed separate from the two to five story structures typically built in the 1950s and 1960s.

As noted earlier, the heights of the Los Angeles dingbat are typically two to three stories. The apartments in Seattle seem to be at a larger scale both vertically as well as horizontally. The most successful apartment projects in Capitol Hill are those that are the size typical in Los Angeles, two to three stories on a narrow site.



Figure 9. Signage (photograph by author)

The L.A. dingbat’s emphasis on the car is evident in several projects inventoried in Capitol Hill (Figure 8). The raised first story are

most typical in the apartments with corridor circulation along the side of the building. These carports are more diverse than the Los Angeles prototype. In the example given (figure 8), the columns of the building are not slender cylindrical piloti, but rather tectonic pillars. The T-shape at the capitol shows the transfer of weight from a beam or girder to the column.



Figure 8. First story car cover (photograph by author)

Other elements in common with the L.A. dingbat are the playful names and signage. Examples of names of apartments inventoried are romantic and picturesque: Camelot, Santa Fe (Figure 9), Casa Nova, Versailles, and Alpine Villa. Others are more futurist, such as the Galaxy or Vertigo. And others conjure the notions associated with the commercial culture of the time with a name like “Thunderbird.”

The last common element discussed in comparison to the dingbat is the overall boxy form. Seattle’s apartments are more rectangular and less rigid than their L.A. counterpart. Yet their overall form is very orthogonal and could be understood as “boxy.”

Although color is a characteristic element in the Los Angeles dingbat, the apartments inventoried in Seattle do not have such variety. There are a couple of exceptional apartments in Seattle. The Val Mar



Figure 10. Apartment with frontal outdoor corridor (Photography by author)

Apartment (Figure 10) is an interesting example with a sea foam green colored facade. Most other apartments were not so striking in color.

Steinbrueck’s Pigeon Hole apartments have outdoor circulation as a main element. He criticizes this element as eliminating privacy. In the Capitol Hill examples this takes the form of street facade circulation corridors and balconies

(Figure 10). A good portion of the apartments inventoried have an exterior corridor along the side of the building (Figure 11). The side corridor was typically accompanied by a courtyard or adjacency to a public open space.

Elements that are not addressed in the two typologies previously outlined suggest that the Seattle variety is neither a pure “dingbat” nor a “pigeon hole” but a distinct Seattle hybrid of mid-century modern apartment complexes.

One of these distinct element is the vertical circulation (Figure 12). It is highlighted through a type of protrusion. This is manifest in a glass box that juts out of the facade or a vertical element which frames the circulation. The composition of the facade completely changes from a dingbat square box to something with a greater hierarchy.



Figure 11. Apartment with side corridor (photograph by author)

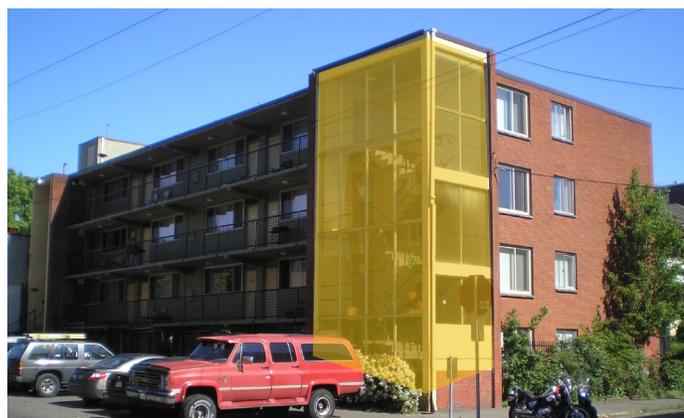


Figure 12 Two examples of apartments with an emphasis on vertical circulation (photographs by author)

Material detail exploration is rich in the Seattle examples. Innovative textures and patterns are created using concrete masonry units on many of the facades (Figure 13). Both patterns illustrated show how raised portions of the block can be organized to create

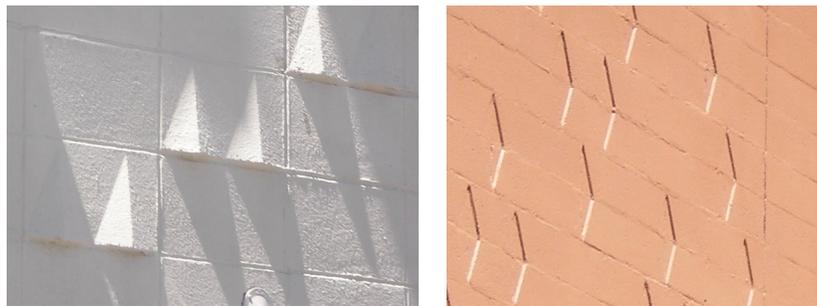


Figure 13. Apartments with CMU details (photographs by author)

interesting facades. Colored glass is another material which seems unique to these Seattle apartments. The application is usually decorative and uses small pieces of glass (figure 14). They are usually applied to the facade rather than used as a window. Tile is used on exterior facades (figure 15). They can be applied to



Figure 14. Apartments with colored glass details (photographs by author)

create a larger pattern or used at a very small scale in a random application.

Although the Capitol Hill apartment buildings hold some elements in common with their sister dingbat apartments in Los Angeles, some of the most distinctive features of these apartments are not derived from their southern counterpart. The Capitol Hill variety of the dingbat is quite unique.

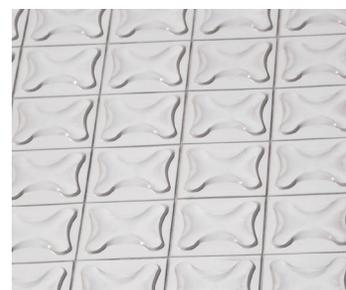


Figure 15. Tile details (photographs by author)

These idiosyncratic apartments should not be overlooked in the future in regards to preservation. They are as much a part of the Seattle landscape as the residential bungalows of Wallingford and the terracotta buildings of Pioneer Square.

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