George McMath, FAIA
Career Achievements

George McMath, FAIA, is widely remembered as one of the most important figures in the preservation and restoration of Portland’s historic buildings. McMath began his career at the age of 14, working as an office boy at Pietro Belluschi’s firm (the firm that Belluschi led after the death of McMath’s grandfather A.E. Doyle, a prominent Portland architect in the early half of the 20th century). After graduating from the University of Oregon in 1959 with a B.Arch, McMath returned to Portland, joining the architectural firm Stewart & Richardson. McMath quickly became a leader in preserving Portland’s historic buildings. In an interview by Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, published by The Architect, McMath explained how from an early age he was concerned by the destruction of historic buildings. He stated “the things I knew as a child were being removed, taken away. It was a very visceral thing with me.” Witnessing the demolition of several of Portland’s historic buildings inspired McMath with a passion to protect and preserve Portland’s architectural history. One of his earliest contributions to the preservation of Portland’s historic buildings was Portland’s first landmark preservation ordinance, which McMath wrote in 1965. The ordinance has continued to protect Portland’s historic buildings since its conception. Even prior to the 1965 ordinance, however, McMath was working to preserve Portland’s architecture. In 1963, he became chairman for the Portland chapter of the AIA Urban Design Committee, and by 1964 he chaired the newly formed Historic Building Committee, a position that he held until 1970. During this time McMath conducted a citywide survey of Portland’s historic buildings and co-authored the book “A Century of Portland Architecture”, highlighting the many architecturally significant buildings in Portland and voicing a concern for preservation. In 1968, McMath helped start the Portland Historic Landmarks Commission, and served as its chair for the next 10 years. In this position, McMath started the urban conservation fund, and advocated the protection of historic architecture in Portland’s Downtown Plan of 1972-1973. In 1970 McMath began work on the Pioneer Courthouse, a project significant in promoting the preservation of historic buildings because it was one of the first restoration projects in Portland. With McMath leading the project, the restoration of the Pioneer Courthouse led to increased awareness about Portland’s historic buildings and promoted other preservation and restoration projects in Portland. McMath’s work on
the Pioneer Courthouse also led to his reputation as being the preservation architect in Portland. McMath’s worked continued as he was appointed to the State Advisory Commission for Historic Preservation in 1970, and helped pass the state’s incentive for the preservation of historic structures. The 1970s also saw McMath’s election to the National Advisory Board of the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1974, and during the same year he contributed essays to the Oregon Historical Society’s two-volume study of regional architecture entitled *Space, Style, and Structure*. The following year, McMath worked to achieve Oregon’s progressive property tax freeze for registered historic buildings. By the late 1970s McMath was arguably the most significant figure in the field of preservation and restoration architecture in Portland. After working tirelessly to protect the architectural history of the city, McMath was recognized by AIA in 1981 with one of its highest honors when he was elected into the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects for his leadership in the field of Architectural Preservation. According to McMath, nearly 75 percent of his business was committed to historical restoration, rehabilitation, and preservation planning work. During his career McMath worked on countless buildings, some of which include the Pioneer Courthouse, the Pittock Mansion, Union Station, Multnomah County Central Library, the New Market Theater, the Bishop House, and the Calvary Presbyterian Church, all in Portland. In Salem, McMath worked on the Oregon State Capitol Dome and the Parsonage. McMath also help restore Officer’s Row at the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site in Washington and Fort Egbert in Alaska. In 1996 McMath semi-retired from his firm, McMath-Dortignaqc, the same firm that he had been hired at after graduating from the U of O, and the one he helped craft to become the leader in preservation architecture. He died in 2007.