



Pacific Northwest Vibe:



Cultivating civility
in two knowledge habitats
in Portland and Seattle

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A bicycle commuter squats beside a storm-water drain. He's on a highway bridge that spans a ravine. It is rush hour, and a flash storm is drenching the roadway. The man's arm is fully extended into the drain as he works to unclog it, presumably so others can travel safely across the flooding roadway. There is no shoulder, no room between him and the speeding cars, and I worry about him as my husband and I drive by.

This was 5:30 p.m. or thereabouts on May 2 on Southwest Barbur Boulevard in Portland, Oregon.

And this is the Pacific Northwest vibe.

Days later, I call my husband to tell him I just lost my pocket-book and need to cancel all our credit cards. He answers his phone as he is briskly walking down Portland's Southwest Second Avenue to meet the woman who noticed my bag on the sidewalk and immediately called to return it with all my money and credit cards, everything, intact.

This, too, is quintessential Pacific Northwest, a combination of manners and thoughtfulness. What designer Bill Stumpf called civility in his book *The Ice Palace That Melted Away*. "Civility is comfort, hidden goodness, social lubricant, personal worth, helping others, play—civility is the joy we take in human achievements and the compassion we show toward our all-too-human faults."

This pervasive good will of the Pacific Northwest is especially evident in its independent bookstores. Here are two I explored.

Portland, Oregon, is a righteous, thoughtful place that even Jane Jacobs, one of the most ardent critics of urban planning, admired. In a 2001 *Metropolis* interview at age 84, the author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* names Portland when asked for an example of what's right with American cities: "There are a lot of constructive things happening in Portland."

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One of them is Office PDX (www.officepdx.com). Office is located in a Bohemian neighborhood Jacobs would have liked. Portland's Alberta community is part early-days SoHo and old-style main street dominated by locally owned and operated businesses. The blocks are short, making a trip to the store an easy stroll from neighboring bungalows. Businesses on Alberta are diverse—the hardware store, food market, specialty boutiques, art galleries, restaurants, and then there is Office.

A boutique and a networking space for creative people, Office sells design and architecture books and magazines, desk accessories, portfolio, presentation and writing tools. Office is also a 21st-century salon for graphic designers, architects, industrial designers, writers, actors, musicians, artists and the like, who come to shop and mix with like-minded people.

John Breen, a celebrated Portland actor who stars in James Westby's "The Auteur," a film slated for a Sundance Film Festival debut, likes the personal interaction with the owners, husband and wife **Tony Secolo** and **Kelly Coller**. "The experience is important to me," Breen says. "If you walk into a Borders Books, for example, you will not find people who love books and reading but you will in an independent book store like this one."

At two years old, Office sits in a 1956 corner building that evokes a mid-century office environment. Its façade is a two-tone brick with original metal-framed windows. Garage doors added later allow light into this small, open store of 1,100 square feet. Even with additions and alterations, we wanted to "respect the history of the building," Coller says. Inside, old-fashioned office furniture and antiques act as props and point-of-purchase displays. The stage is set with Tanker desks and SteelAge filing cabinets, a collection of Kodak home movie cameras, and even Coller's grandpa's "Cocktail Culture," a mixed drinks recipe book—complete with one for Grandpa Nelson's punch written in pencil on the back of the title page. "Design without pretense—no entitlement, no pedigree; we are not that way," says Secolo. "We want to get design moving forward."

Office puts a shoulder to this mission by hosting always-free events geared toward the enrichment of the creative community. Its June 21 portfolio panel discussion was packed with roughly 75 people who came to hear what some of the city's top creative directors have to say about how to get work in their worlds. Adidas, Nike, Sandstrom Design and Wieden+Kennedy were among the companies represented on the panel. Some of the advice that night: Give us something we don't have. Check the ego at the door. Show us you can listen, collaborate and empathize. Be honest, be clear about your role. Show you can do more than make something pretty. Show us you can think. Show us you can solve problems. Tell a story visually.



Paul Issac Thomas, a 19-year-old graduate of The Art Institute of Portland, a “Design Sorcerer,” according to his card, attended with a handful of students. Afterward outside Office, the Sorcerer said, “This is one of the more Portland places in Portland; it’s by people of design for people of design; it has a genuine feel to it.”

Panelist **Luis Rueda**, Design Director in Nike Brand Design, says Office fills a void by providing the city’s “very healthy” creative community with unique things especially appealing to them. The owners show “ingenuity and that they care by contributing to the community” through their events, which deepens Rueda’s admiration for this young company. “They fulfill a function and a need.”

Rueda learned of Office through word of mouth and stopped in with his wife, **Cindy Sato**. “Office is representative of a whole feeling spreading from city to city in Oregon around environmental issues,” Sato said. Sato, an Event Planner at the Tiger Woods Conference Center, purchases from Office regularly and recommends them to others because Office meets and exceeds the competition in service and the quality of its offerings. Sato recently needed 100 Moleskine notebooks for an event and was told by a national chain she could only buy bulk quantities starting at 500 per. Secolo ordered the 100 books for her. “If you need it, he gets it,” she said.

Office is more intellectual and cultural habitat than store. People in the Pacific Northwest rally behind it for very personal reasons: the experience, the service, the genuine atmosphere, the unique poignant offerings, community involvement, the environmental impact of doing business locally. It seems to me Office devotees are looking for heroes and soulmates, and they want to do business with people like them.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, my husband and I were walking our dog and noticed a homemade bench on a neighbor’s corner property. The bench was at street level, down a slope on this half-acre property on SW Ridgeview Lane. I wondered aloud why they put it there so far from the house they’ll never use it? My husband walked over and sat down. “It’s for us,” he said.

More of the vibe.



Take a drive to Seattle?

Seattle seduces you with its great cosmopolitan energy and heavy sustainable undertow. Coming upon it, you see the blown-out tires and other garbage on bumpy roadways separated by misaligned Jersey barriers. Seattle is an abrupt vertical city topped by the landmark Space Needle tower. It has the dog-treat bakery, the fashionable shops, world-class art museums and galleries, a public library designed by starchitect Rem Koolhaas. Seattle is also home to a little bookstore that commands an inordinate amount of affinity.

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Imagine Oscar Wilde as the witty and well-read proprietor of a bookstore that caters to subjects that interest you most. He alone picks the books he allows into his store and is generally at the store, matching requests for new knowledge with new works that push the future forward.

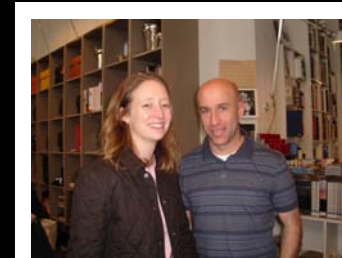
If you can visualize this, you are close to understanding **Peter Miller**, the namesake and owner of Peter Miller Architectural & Design Books & Supplies (www.petermiller.com). The single-location store on the 1900 block of Seattle's First Avenue comprises roughly 7,500 titles. It includes such luscious picks as Luis Barragan's *The Eye Embodied* from the Netherlands; *New Cityscapes*, by Jan Gehl, of Copenhagen; and *Wood Design Awards 2007*, a book from Toronto. The atmosphere at Peter Miller's is peaceful and inspirational. The store has high ceilings and cubbyhole bookshelves designed to hang like spears on the walls. The cubbies take only 12 to 14 books at 16 and 12 inches wide to make it easy to peruse the titles on the spines. Shelving spanning the entire wall would overwhelm the eye, Miller explains.

Miller arrived in Seattle with a master's degree in English from Harvard University 37 years ago and shortly afterward opened his store. He has made it his business to pay extremely close attention to emerging trends in architecture and design, and updates his store accordingly. Over the years, patrons have come to expect that if there is a major exhibit anywhere in the world or hot new artist showing in town, that Miller will have the book of record on it. Miller is both a "chatty Cathy," as one of his employees secretly relays, and a local celebrity.

Explaining his philosophy, Miller says, "I don't do my audience very well; I do the book. Done correctly, the customer should feel the store is second to none."

And the patrons at Peter Miller's? The group below would make quite the dinner party, especially if you tossed in Peter. I talked to these random shoppers at Miller's 1,500-square-foot store on a sunny Saturday afternoon in June.

Lynn McBride, an architect with Mithun, and her husband, **Damien McBride** of NBBJ were at Peter Miller Books looking for inspiration for a new home, a forward-reaching home, a sustainable home that they will design and build together. They were also after the latest resources on Spanish architecture. They will lead a class of Montana State University architecture students through Spanish cities this summer, and they came to Miller's store to refresh their bibliography.



LYNN & DAMIEN
MCBRIDE

—
INSPIRATION.
RESOURCES.
REFRESH BIBLIOGRAPHY.



FRITZ LEVY



CHRIS WOOD

—
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HOT NOW

SARAH LARSEN

—
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THE PEOPLE FOR A
GOOD BOOK

Asked why here when there are so many bookstores in Seattle vying for this architecture town's architecture community, Damien McBride says, "Just any architect automatically knows what it is and where it is. You mention Peter Miller, you know that's all you need to say. He caters to forward-thinking architects."

Lynn, who designs skyscrapers for a living, adds that architects, principals included, will send their people to "go see Peter" as a part of their research for new projects.

Fritz Levy is a retired professor and author who taught history at Washington State University for 45 years. He has been a store patron for as long as Peter's been in business. "Peter knows his books," Levy says. Miller placed a book in his hands that day: *Who Are You; the History of the Surveillance State*, by Mark Kyburz. "You would think Seattle isn't big enough to support a place like this, but I'm sure Peter's not just doing this for love."

Chris Wood is the CEO of Clario, a software company with a technology that translates two-dimensional, microscopic images of things that can kill you into 3-D so that radiologists can identify in time to save you. He bought an Italian leather bag, a Nava. As Wood waited for his credit-card purchase, Miller approached him with the observation that Italians are not known to be workaholics and, "they didn't intend the bag to hold a laptop and "a ton of bricks so don't fill my bag with too much—you'll break it."

Wood loves this store. "It has what's hot now. If you ask people in Seattle who have lived here awhile for an interesting Seattle story, Peter Miller will come up. It is iconic. The design is right. The location is super."

Wood was with his girlfriend, **Sara Larsen**, a product manager for Northstar Neuroscience, a company creating a brain stimulator to one day repair neurons damaged by such things as Alzheimer's or stroke. "I don't walk around and look," she says. "I come in and ask the people here for a good book."

Greg Quist, a creative director for Tommy Bahama, has been coming to Peter Miller for decades. He especially likes the size of the store. "It's small enough. Sometimes too much is too much, and here there's always something new." He says he might find some of these books at other stores, but compared to Miller's store, the others are hit or miss. "It's comfortable," Quist adds as a clerk is ringing up some \$300 in design books for him. "Not a contrived sort of environment, not a place you go to critique."

Asked his thinking on the store's reputation, Miller waxes Wildean: "They come here for optimism, to know that the world isn't just down to Boeing and Safeco," says Peter Miller, "They come here for confirmation that design matters and courage matters and color and history matter." His store design exemplifies his words. "Our job is to be open and well designed, the selection should be correct."

As for the comparison to Oscar Wilde, Miller says: "Oh no not Oscar Wilde, too many cats and sofas and literary allusions and such!"

