John Wiebenson

Archhorse started out in 1971 as Mailman, a talking mailbox who argued for the preservation of the Old Post Office down on Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania Avenue. It seems that ever since this mighty stone structure was put up in 1897, a bunch of Federal officials—GSA administrators, Fine Arts commissioners, even a President—have wanted to have it taken down. They claimed that Romanesque architecture was not appropriate for this capital city, particularly not at its center right beside the path taken by Presidential parades. These people wanted a more neoclassic set of façades put here in order to make a tidy blend with all the other façades the government has built.

It is not unusual for an institution’s members to want to express their territory in this way—through continuity of a particular architectural style. The University of Michigan regents have favored Spanish tile roofs for Berkeley’s buildings, while their counterparts at the University of Maryland have pushed for a sort of Georgian style, the kind modified a bit by financial considerations. In Washington, D.C., the force of this idea was vigorous enough to have already converted some 15 blocks between the Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue into neoclassic façades. Only the Old Post Office remained, standing as a towering monument to all the lost theaters, hotels, shops, and apartments that once brought life to this part of Washington's downtown.

Yet, a style can engage as thoroughly as it can offend. Many local citizens wanted to keep this old building, precisely because they like its bulky presence. They also liked the Old Post Office in territorial terms. They looked at it as a massive, symbolic bulwark that could resist further Federal seizures of the city's territory, and, therefore, acted to save the Old Post Office. They formed organizations. They testified at Senate hearings. They badgered newspapers and television stations for coverage. And, during this time of putting together material for the media, Mailman was born.

Mailman’s mission was to translate noble, but ponderous, Senate testimony into a more inviting form that would then be made available to newspapers. There was some precedent for Mailman. The U.S. Army used comic books to persuade G.I.s to ponder over issues of maintaining trucks and tanks. Martin Luther King, Jr., distributed thousands of comic books throughout the South as one means for explaining how nonviolent protest works. These precedents showed that the informal mixed-media of comics can help readers to learn. And, because comics can present a variety of visual data, they can be particularly valuable in explaining architectural issues. Mailman could, for example, point to something outside the Old Post Office and, in another frame, let the reader look into the building. He could also pop into the planners’ offices to point out their errors, and then move on to explain how people could pitch in and help.

Drawing Mailman turned out to be easier than getting him promoted. The editor of the major Washington paper was offended by the suggestion that pictures could help make points clear. "Our readers can read," he explained. But, Sam Smith, editor of The Progressive Review (then called the DC Gazette), asked to run Mailman in his somewhat less major Washington paper. Copies were then sent to the deans of every architecture school in the United States as part of a package asking for their help in saving the Old Post Office. About 45 percent responded by getting letters out to Senators and Congressmen. The Old Post Office is so thoroughly saved that even the Federal Government celebrates its preservation.

Since then, The Progressive Review has helped Mailman (and his current manifestation, Archhorse) to win other battles. Zoning for Washington’s Dupont Circle area was often a subject during the several years it took to get better protection from developers there. Archhorse has also helped get a streetcar loop included in planning papers for the city’s downtown; it may, of course, take years before any real plans are actually drawn. Further, Archhorse has reviewed books, looked at the District skyline, sponsored a competition that produced improvements to the design of Washington’s Western Plaza, talked about saving energy, and discussed a self-help housing scheme proposed by an architecture student from Canada.

Archhorse has talked about Washington, D.C., planning and architecture problems for the most part; there always seems to be some project going on that would promote Federal pump at the expense of the city’s life. For example, the same forces that would have had the Old Post Office taken down recently wanted a colonial memorial arch raised up next to Pennsylvania Avenue extending into the street, decisión the resulting damage to the Square’s historic scale and focus. A couple of Archhorses helped stop the arch, but similar efforts have failed to stop Pennsylvania Avenue’s planners into putting in all the housing around Market Square that is needed to bring back its once vibrant commercial and social life.

Future topics might include showing how a proposed
new building for Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C., could be redesigned to offer as much space, but without having to damage two small hotels that happen to be special assets in the Dupont Circle area. And, in order to get beyond Washington, D.C.’s boundaries from time to time, Archhorse might point out how architecture schools could make their curricula more relevant to architecture practice, or how the schools could try to be a community resource again, or how those repairing the Statue of Liberty need not change her torch from an incandescent object to a merely reflective one. Perhaps Archhorse will note ways that St. John’s College in Santa Fe, NM, could have been more considerate in dealing with its natural surroundings in recent years. It seems that as long as there are institutions, governments and developers, Archhorse will always have material for explaining how to do things better. Sometimes the explaining will just lead to another lost battle. But, other times, as has happened in the past, Archhorse’s explanations will provide important help for a victory well worth winning.

The Archhorse and Mailmen strips have appeared in the Progressive Review, their home base. (Formerly the D.C. Gazette.)
ARCHIhorse

The current landscape needs serious reform in order to create a sustainable environment.

The new ArchiBull will be located in the city center, amidst the skyscrapers.

The ArchiBull will be a symbol of the city's commitment to sustainability and innovation.

The ArchiBull will be a source of inspiration for the community, showcasing the importance of architecture and design in our daily lives.

The ArchiBull will be a place for people to gather, learn, and collaborate.

The ArchiBull will be a hub for innovation and creativity, fostering the development of new ideas and technologies.

The ArchiBull will be a testament to the city's commitment to the future, ensuring that it remains a vibrant and dynamic urban environment for generations to come.

The ArchiBull will be a reflection of the city's values and aspirations, serving as a beacon of hope and inspiration for all who visit.

The ArchiBull will be a symbol of the city's resilience and adaptability, demonstrating its ability to evolve and thrive in a changing world.

The ArchiBull will be a legacy of the city's commitment to the environment, leaving a lasting impact on the world and its future.