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Seattle's Bathhouse Arts Spaces: Spectrum Dance, Seattle Public Theater, and Seward Park Clay Studio

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Seattle's Bathhouse Arts Spaces:
Spectrum Dance, Seattle Public Theater, and Seward Park Clay Studio

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Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

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Abstract

Since 2000, the Seattle Public Theater (SPT) has occupied space in the Green Lake Bathhouse on the shores of Green Lake in Seattle, WA. This space was converted for shared use as a theater and seasonal public restrooms in 1970 after serving solely as a public bathhouse since its construction in 1927. In addition to Green Lake, bathhouses at Madrona Park and Seward Park were also converted to shared arts and bathhouse spaces in 1970 and today house Spectrum Dance Theater and Seward Park Clay Studio respectively. All three buildings share significant architectural design elements and have many overlapping renovation needs. While the low-cost lease partnerships with the City of Seattle and the Parks Department have contributed significantly to these companies' ability to exist for many years in a volatile and expensive real estate market, the ownership of the buildings by the City government has made repairs and updates complex and challenging. This case study provides an overview of some of the limitations and opportunities inherent in this arrangement and examines specific renovation and improvement projects at all three spaces. Through interviews with staff at Spectrum Dance, SPT, and Seward Park Clay Studio, as well as historical research and site visits, the intent is to provide a document of the history of the bathhouse arts facilities and a more specific look at the current state of the Green Lake Bathhouse and future plans for expansion and improvement within the context of the shared history of the three organizations.

Seattle's Bathhouse Arts Spaces:

Spectrum Dance, Seattle Public Theater, and Seward Park Clay Studio

In Seattle there exist three arts organizations that share space with bathhouse facilities in 1920s era brick buildings on the city beaches at Green Lake, Madrona Park and Seward Park. These buildings were all converted to arts facilities in the early 1970s when the City of Seattle and the Seattle Parks Department recognized waning need for the bathhouse facilities as well as a desire by the City to support the arts community in Seattle. As a result, these three spaces were converted to house three different types of arts activities; dance, theater and visual art. The current resident organizations in the three facilities are as follows (Figure 1, below):

- Madrona Park Bathhouse - Spectrum Dance Theater
- Green Lake Bathhouse - Seattle Public Theater
- Seward Park Bathhouse - Seward Park Clay Studio

Through personal interviews with staff at Spectrum Dance, Seattle Public Theater (SPT), and Seward Park Clay Studio, as well as historical documents, online research, and site visits, the intent of this case study is to provide a document of the history of the bathhouse arts venues and more specifically the current state of the Green Lake Bathhouse and future plans for expansion and improvement within the context of the shared renovation history of the three facilities.

This case study sets out to answer the following questions:

- What is the history of these arts spaces?
- What renovations have been done in the years since the original conversions?
- How can information about the other facilities and organizations help inform decisions about future facilities projects for these three organizations?
- What can be done to utilize these spaces to their fullest potential?

- What are some possibilities for future renovations?
- What do the next 50 years hold?

Figure 1. Seattle's Bath House Arts Spaces: Resident Organizations

Name	Spectrum Dance Theater	Seattle Public Theater	Seattle Clay Studio
Location	Madrona Bathhouse	Green Lake Bathhouse	Seward Park Bathhouse
Address	800 Lake Washington Blvd Seattle, WA 98122	7312 West Green Lake Dr N Seattle, WA 98103	5900 Lake Washington Blvd S Seattle, WA 98188
Website	spectrumdance.org	seattlepublictheater.org	sewardparkart.org
Gross Operating 2017	\$1.2 million	\$602,000	\$408,000
Leadership 2019	Donald Byrd - Artistic Director	Annie Lareau, Kelly Kitchens - Co-Artistic Directors Elisabeth Pershing - Managing Director	Peter Olson - Director
Founded	1982	1989	1969
In Residence	1985	2000	1986
Primary Activities	Resident Professional Dance company, Touring Productions, Dance Classes, Co-Productions	Professional Theater Company, Full five-show Season, Education, Community Events	Pottery Studio Space, Open Studio, Education, Kilns - ceramics firing
Specialized Needs	Sprung Floors, Marley floor treatment, Mirrors, Theatrical lighting, Theatrical Seating-flexible	Performance venue — Theater, Food service, Actors Union compliant dressing rooms, Set construction space	Kilns, Hazardous chemical storage, Gallery Space
Offsite Activities	Perf spaces, rehearsal spaces, touring venues, costume and set shops and storage?	Rehearsal Space, Office and meeting space, scenic shop, costume shop, storage for scenic, costume and office	Off-site gallery and show space, retail
2017 - 990 Link	https://www.guidestar.org/profile/91-1263530	https://www.guidestar.org/profile/91-1398805	https://www.guidestar.org/profile/91-1316829

History of the Bathhouse Arts Facilities

All three buildings, Green Lake, Madrona Park, and Seward Park, were built in the late 1920s and are situated on gorgeous public beaches in Seattle parks. They have proven to be valuable arts facilities while still serving beachgoers in the summer months. As patterns of use changed over time, in the late 1960s the city determined that the city-owned bathhouse properties were not being fully utilized. A plan was created and implemented in 1970 to convert portions of three of them to art spaces: one for theater, one for dance and one for visual art.

All three spaces are in naturally beautiful environments with free parking close by, assets not shared with many art spaces in other areas of Seattle, particularly those in the downtown area. There are many architectural similarities and the buildings have many overlapping renovation needs. The arts spaces primarily occupy the central portion of each building. All three buildings are of an age where they are eligible for landmark status, but they are not currently protected or constrained in this way.

An informal visual assessment indicates that the three spaces are laid out similarly but there are some variations in square footage usage. As a result of the original 1970s renovations, the Madrona Park Bathhouse that houses Spectrum Dance Theater has a full second story in the central section of the building, which enables them to have a full-sized rehearsal studio on the lower floor and another studio above which can also serve as a performance venue. The Clay Studio at the Seward Park Bathhouse has a partial second story in the center section that is currently being used as storage but appears to have been designed with its large wall of windows as a gallery space. The bathhouse at Green Lake, home of Seattle Public Theater, is operating with what appears to be the smallest square footage as it has no second story, either partial or full. In addition, 1983 renovations at Spectrum added office space in the entire south wing which

was previously occupied by bathhouse changing space and bathrooms (Innova, 2017). The small size and shared use necessitate the use of off-site facilities for all three organizations with that of Spectrum Dance and Seattle Public Theater being the most costly and extensive.



Spectrum Dance Theatre at the Madrona Park Bathhouse. Photo by Cristin Miller.

Post-1970s Renovations

The Spectrum Dance space has undergone the most extensive renovations since the original conversion in 1970. An extremely valuable resource is the public document from Innova Architects: *Assessment Madrona Bathhouse Seattle Parks and Recreation Architectural and Engineering Maintenance Evaluation Study*, City of Seattle, 2017. This evaluation contains detailed information about the history of the Madrona bathhouse; an exhaustive report on the current state of the facility and surrounding grounds; as well as recommendations for short- and long-term renovations including budgetary estimates. This assessment includes information about the 2002 south wing office, kitchenette and dressing room expansion, as well as a large general renovation in 1982, electrical upgrades in 2009, and subsequent roof replacement, HVAC upgrades and general repairs. Included in the report is a proposal for the addition of a

third studio space in the north wing resulting from further decreases in use of the beach bathhouse facilities and potential for reorganization of the facilities layout.



Seward Park Clay Studio at the Seward Park Bathhouse. Photo by Cristin Miller.

The Clay Studio is at the beginning of a similar assessment but has not undergone significant renovation at any time since 1970. Seattle Public Theater is currently undergoing ADA bathroom compliance renovations which were planned, contracted and paid for by the City of Seattle. Other recent changes at SPT have been cosmetic adjustments to the front lobby consisting of paint and signage as well as new lighting fixtures all paid for and installed by SPT. In addition, SPT has raised \$250,000 for a city-mandated and coordinated electrical upgrade planned for the summer of 2020.

The Clay Studio is the smallest organization in terms of budget (Figure 1), but also in numbers of community members served. Their website lists 500+ participants in their organizational activities per year. Seattle Public Theater has a larger impact with their five shows per year in the 165-seat theater, with the possibility of up to 2400 audience members per show for a total of over 12,000 audience members per year, plus students in the education programs, artists employed, and community events attendees. Spectrum Dance has potentially an even larger footprint and this is reflected in their \$1.2 million yearly budget. SPT is in a period of

growth and is just now, after a period of transition in leadership, entering a phase where expansion of their programs and reach is possible.

Seattle Public Theater Interviews

In conversations with Managing Director, Elisabeth Pershing and Technical Director, Dave Hastings, it seems that the relationship between the organization's leadership and the City of Seattle Parks and Recreation facilities Case Manager for the Green Lake Bathhouse is excellent (E. Pershing, personal communication, March 21, 2019). The City has been flexible about requests to modify, repair, and renovate the space, based on the organization's needs. They expressed the desire to maximize the value of the Public Offset clause in the lease. Public Offset allows the organization to provide an account of public value at the end of each year which is counted as monetary value against rental costs. There is a clear public benefit of the arts organization in this space which could translate into a higher priority for city funding and timeline.

The facilities improvement wish list (Appendix A) is in line with the sort of work that has already occurred at Madrona/Spectrum and a public/private funding partnership could be feasible. The needs for renovation are weighted toward functionality and saving on off-site rental and cartage costs as well as responsibly re-using materials from show to show. This could also be a value for other arts organizations in Seattle as there is currently no shared theatrical storage facility. On-site rehearsal and office space would greatly increase the ability of the staff and education program to function effectively and increase programming and usage of the space. ADA accessibility issues are important for backstage spaces as well as front-of-house and parking areas. Dressing room and kitchenette/lounge space is needed for both front-of-house needs and actors union (Actors Equity Association) compliance. This would enable the theater to

serve the audience needs and the artist needs to a higher level of satisfaction. Acquiring this additional square footage through exterior expansion, addition of a second story and reconfiguration of the space being used by the beachside changing rooms and lifeguard office would be advantageous.

Other than cosmetic upgrades to the public areas of the building, an increase in seating capacity for the theater and improved sight lines seem to be of the highest priority. The largest need for the building is the addition of office and meeting space, upgrades to back stage areas including improved and ADA accessible dressing rooms, a green room/lounge with kitchen facilities for use by staff and front of house concessions, on-site storage for costumes and sets, and on-site facilities for set and costume construction. An expansion into the existing and possibly underutilized bathhouse changing rooms would be feasible based on the changes that have been implemented at the Madrona bathhouse/Spectrum Dance space and as recommended in their recent assessment (Innova, 2017).

Relationship with City of Seattle

Based on personal interviews with staff at SPT and Spectrum and the scope of the current renovation plans in place, the City of Seattle and the Parks Department have demonstrated a commitment to and understanding of the value of these facilities (E. Pershing, personal communication, March 21, 2019). In examining the partnership between the City and the Parks Department and the various arts organizations it is clear that the impact has been largely positive.

The negative aspects of these facilities and the relationship with the City of Seattle include the potential lack of funding for upkeep and refurbishment tied to shifts in city government policy toward the arts. In addition, the limited control that the organizations have over the timeline and implementation of any capital improvements, as well as communication

issues can be challenging. As shown in the example of Spectrum Dance and Seattle Public Theater, the need for off-site space may continue to grow, necessitating a broader facilities plan for these organizations beyond that of the bathhouse spaces.

A low-cost lease in a public building through the city of Seattle enables all three organizations to sustain a successful long-term presence in the community. With the ability to use Public Offset to reduce the monthly rent, the organizations are able to save a substantial amount of money every year. SPT pays \$500 per month in a space which the city values at just over \$2000/month. The cost of space rental in Seattle is a significant barrier to non-profit organizations of all types and the added advantage of a dedicated space with exclusive control is extremely exceptional (Spacefinder, 2019). These bathhouse arts spaces are a huge asset to the Seattle arts community as a whole, but they can be challenging to maintain and utilize to their fullest potential.

Conclusions

A comprehensive report such as that from Innova Architects for Spectrum Dance would be hugely beneficial for all three organizations. This report (Innova, 2017, p. 8) categorized long and short-term needs according to the following categories which are very applicable across the facilities:

- Code and Life Safety Related
- Program Improvement Opportunity
- Operational Cost Savings Potential

The areas of improvement identified for the Madrona Park Bathhouse are very much in line with SPT's desires for the Green Lake Bathhouse and could very easily be translated to Green Lake: energy efficiency, fire and earthquake safety, ADA compliance, and usage

modifications such as converting bath house changing facilities to arts spaces.

As part of a larger feasibility study for the Seattle Public Theater, and to assist in creating a plan for next steps for SPT to plan and engage in a capital improvement project that will update the facility and secure its functionality for the next 50 years, SPT needs to assess who they serve in the context of their location and respond accordingly. Their relationship with the Parks Department and the City of Seattle has both challenging and beneficial elements that must be taken into account when planning for future possible expansion projects and improvements. The first step must be to maximize the utility of the building in its current state, stabilize the function of the organization and then look to the wider community to contribute to the updating and expansion of the bathhouse. There are a number of major organizational stability issues that must be addressed before any capital campaign can begin. Seattle Public Theater must recognize and achieve measures of readiness in advance of an expansion and capital campaign.

Recommended Next Steps for Seattle Public Theater

The desire to improve and expand the facilities at the Green Lake Bathhouse seems rooted in a genuine desire to capitalize on recent successes artistically (Gregory Awards, 2018) and new leadership and energy. As noted in the TDC study of the \$1 Building, a facilities expansion has the potential to create an, "Increased scale of impact, new offerings, enhanced artistic quality, improved outside perceptions, increased visibility" and other positive benefits (Curtis, 2015, p. 13-14).

Some ideas or avenues for additional research on this topic could include a survey of Seattle Spacefinder for comparable arts spaces to more accurately gauge the fair market value of these facilities; contacting the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture Cultural Spaces Liaison; interviews with the Parks Department Case Manager and the current renovation project manager;

interviews with the founding company members of all three organizations who may have more insight into the initial moves into the bathhouse spaces; and additional research about the original early 1970s renovations in regard to motivation, funding, political supporters, long-term plans, original tenants. As much as the organizations in residence may feel a sense of ownership of the spaces, they are still renters and as such are constrained by their lease agreements with the City and the Parks Department to such a degree that this must be weighed very strongly in any plans for capital campaigns and possible renovations.

“Sustainable Cultural Buildings are Purposeful, Adaptable, Maintainable, and Loveable”

(Oman, 2019)

This is certainly true of the Seattle bathhouse arts spaces. Investment in these valuable spaces is needed and the possibility of a public/private partnership to provide additional funding would be well worth pursuing, certainly for the individual organizations in residence, and also for the City of Seattle and the arts community as a whole. The beautiful settings of these facilities is not currently reflected in their interior spaces, and expansion and renovation at all three sites would demonstrate the City of Seattle's support for the arts and provide a high return on the investment. Public facilities and creative re-use of existing buildings are extremely valuable and would be an excellent investment for the City of Seattle to have lasting impact for small arts organizations.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Cristin Miller, MFA 2019 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman and Bill Moskin. Interviews were conducted with Dave Hastings, Technical Director at Seattle Public Theater (SPT); Elisabeth Pershing, former SPT Managing Director; and Bob Gribas, Registrar and Youth Theater Director at Spectrum Dance Theater; as part of this research during Fall Quarter, 2014. Updated in 2020 by Susan Kunimatsu. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

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Figures



Madrona Park Bathhouse viewed from the south. Photo by Cristin Miller.



Madrona Park Bathhouse, east facade. Photo by Cristin Miller.



Green Lake Bathhouse, east façade. Photo by Cristin Miller.



Seward Park Bathhouse, south façade. Photo by Cristin Miller.



Seward Park Bathhouse viewed from the east. Photo by Cristin Miller.

Appendix A

Seattle Public Theater Renovation Wish List

Electrical updates – as planned summer 2020

Added second-story rehearsal/education studio, office, dressing room meeting space

ADA accessible throughout

Expanded lobby and box office

Adjustments for accessibility to parking lot and front of building

Upgrade lighting grid

Upgrade booth

Improved sight lines in theater – adjust riser heights in seating areas

Increase number of seats in theater to 250

Create shop space – sets

Create storage space – sets, costumes, lighting

Add kitchenette for staff and front-of-house use

Cosmetic upgrades to theater house

ADA-compliant backstage and dressing room areas

Outdoor concession capability to capitalize on location at Green Lake

Outdoor performance space