

Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

Consolidated Works

Arts Ecosystem Research Project

2021

The Rise and Fall of Consolidated Works and the Arts in South Lake Union

Cay Lane
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/consolidated-works>

Recommended Citation

Lane, Cay, "The Rise and Fall of Consolidated Works and the Arts in South Lake Union" (2021).
Consolidated Works. 1.
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/consolidated-works/1>

This Case Study is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts Ecosystem Research Project at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consolidated Works by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.

The Rise and Fall of Consolidated Works and the Arts in South Lake Union

Cay Lane

Seattle University

Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

March 19, 2021

Abstract

Seattle's neighborhoods are at risk of becoming homogenized by gentrification and tech-focused profit-driven development. Though it is well-established that Seattle is a creative and diverse city, cherished arts districts like Capitol Hill and the Uptown region surrounding the Seattle Center have changed. South Lake Union is another a stark example. This case study examines how culturally vibrant neighborhoods are created and what outside factors can inhibit the growth of the distinctive neighborhood identities that are crucial to developing a sense of community and organizing advocacy. It starts with the hypothesis that, without community advocacy, one dominant factor such traffic or a single powerful industry can overwhelm a neighborhood. It will compare three neighborhoods in Seattle and the historical motivations that created them. It will highlight three factors that cultural organizations and arts advocates should consider when advocating for diverse growth in their neighborhood. Underestimating the impact of traffic patterns resulted in problems that have limited the growth of cultural organizations. Loss of affordable sites for arts nonprofits has dramatically shortened the longevity of such organizations in South Lake Union when compared to Capitol Hill and Uptown. Lastly, in the case of the South Lake Union nonprofit Consolidated Works, shifts in their arts programming, coupled with facility instability and a lack of audience in the neighborhood, led to mission drift and were contributing causes of the closure of the once lauded organization.

The Rise and Fall of Consolidated Works and the Arts in South Lake Union

Seattle has many civic claims to fame. One is its reputation as an eclectic arts city unlike any other. Tucked away in the Pacific Northwest and far from the spotlight that cultural epicenters like Los Angeles and New York experience, Seattle has quietly birthed and nurtured a number of artistic movements. Seattle is less intense than East Coast arts communities, but is also far removed from more relaxed California and Midwest art cities. Seattle's rainy disposition and off-center approach to creativity has made it possible for art communities to develop and grow on their own terms and in response to specific cultural influences. This homegrown approach creates unique art spaces and supports art as an industry and its creative community in a unique way. This story of do-it-yourself (DIY) artistic development is disseminated by locals and visitors alike, but it ignores many other voices in the city's history. This research explores Seattle's art infrastructure through the lens of one of its failures, in order to understand the weaknesses inherent in our civic system and explore future opportunities for more comprehensive arts growth.

This research hinges on one question: what happens to a neighborhood that has lost its way? Specifically, what happens to neighborhood identity over decades and generations of neglect and how is that progression reflected in the neighborhood's art spaces? This study focuses on South Lake Union, 359 acres of land located to the east of the Seattle Center and transected by the two largest freeways in the city, Highway 99 and Interstate 5 which form the neighborhood's western and eastern borders (PSRC, 2013). South Lake Union was a hub for Seattle's maritime economy in the 1800s and a residential neighborhood to a melting pot of immigrants for much of the 20th Century. In recent years, South Lake Union has faltered as a community despite its proximity to other flourishing neighborhoods. How did South Lake Union,

with its role in regional history and central location in an artistic city like Seattle, end up with so few cultural organizations and facilities for the programming, production, presentation, exhibition of any of the arts and cultural disciplines? (Florida Division of Arts & Culture, n.d.)

South Lake Union's History

The neighborhood of South Lake Union was given its name by Thomas Mercer in 1854, in a public announcement during Seattle's first Independence Day picnic. That day, a ship canal was proposed that would connect the larger Lake Washington to its smaller neighbor Lake Union and continue westward to Puget Sound (Crowley, 2003). Laboring under Seattle's often inclement weather conditions, the excavation took over 80 years to complete. During this time, the neighborhood grew into a diverse community, "South Lake Union's Cascade Neighborhood was an ethnic melting pot of immigrants from Scandinavia, Greece, Russia, and the Balkans, a comfortable middle-class neighborhood of modest houses and small farms," (Becker, 2007a, para. 11).

By the 1950s, the canal was complete, but federal and city governments' plans to extend the Interstate 5 freeway to northern Seattle resulted in another decade of construction in South Lake Union. Traffic exiting Interstate 5 was routed onto Mercer Street, one of the largest thoroughfares of South Lake Union, becoming the "Mercer Mess," a traffic bottleneck that still exists (Crowley, 2003). By the 1960s, Interstate 5 also blocked most traffic between South Lake Union and the prosperous residential district of Capitol Hill to the east. Cross-traffic between the two neighborhoods was now severed by a menacing succession of gray concrete walls, shifting South Lake Union's building stock away from single-family homes and toward the commercial (Becker, 2007a). In 1969, there was an opportunity to break that blockade with a proposal for an elevated freeway that would connect Highway 99 to Interstate 5, but city voters rejected it (The

Seattle Times, 2003). As the City of Seattle grew, so did South Lake Union's focus on commercial and industrial uses. The remaining single-family homes were bought up in swaths and homeowners were replaced by landlords and tenants. The neighborhood no longer possessed a strong cultural identity.

In 1991, *Seattle Times* columnist John Hinterberger and architect Fred Bassetti, proposed a new use for the South Lake Union area: "a vast 61-acre civic lawn framed by high-tech laboratories, condos, bistros, and tree-lined promenades" (Becker, 2007a, para. 14). Dubbed the Seattle Commons, the idea was immediately controversial, pitting Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, then-Mayor Norm Rice, and "a widely diverse group of supporters against small business owners and Seattle residents who did not view the park and extensive redevelopment in South Lake Union as a high priority for public funding" (Becker, 2007b, para 3). In 1992, the city received an anonymous loan of \$20 million (later revealed to be from Allen) for the purchase of land for the proposed park. This did little to assuage taxpayers' fears in the face of the Commons committee's proposal for a \$312 million, 20-year project in their first public draft (Seattle Times, 2003, para. 11). In 1995, voters rejected a \$111 million tax levy proposed to fund the park construction. In 1996, a scaled-back plan with a \$50 million price tag was also defeated (The Seattle Times, 2003). At the time, this looked like a loss for Allen, but as author Paula Becker (2007a) put it, "it drew attention to the neighborhood's potential and spurred substantial property assembly and investment by Paul Allen's Vulcan Real Estate Co. and others, setting the stage for South Lake Union's current twenty-first-century revival" (para. 15). Allen was ultimately rewarded in his pursuit of South Lake Union's development (Scruggs, 2018).

The E-mancipation of South Lake Union

Walking around South Lake Union in 2021, this history was hardly visible. The once-nondescript neighborhood, molded by supply and demand over decades, had been born anew. After the Seattle Commons project failed, Allen took possession of 11.5 acres of land bought for the project with the \$20 million loan he had made to the city (Scruggs, 2018). He re-envisioned South Lake Union as a critical mass of science and technology enterprises. The remaining housing stock continued to decline due to inferior construction materials and lack of maintenance (Becker, 2007b). Since 2007, Allen and others have brought tech giants like Amazon and Facebook into the neighborhood (Scruggs, 2018). By 2013, Allen's Vulcan Development had built 4.6 million square feet of "new office, biotech, residential and mixed-use projects" in South Lake Union (Monahan, 2013, para. 6).

Not everyone saw the conglomeration of buildings filled with internet and biotech companies as the way to revitalize South Lake Union. "If it's only corporate complexes housed in big towers, you're not going to be a great urban center" (Monahan, 2013, para. 11). Even at the time of Allen's death in 2018, when most accounts of his work took on an especially glowing tone, some voiced concerns over the way Vulcan Development had remade the neighborhood. In a lengthy account of Allen's career, journalist Gregory Scruggs (2018) summarized his impact: "much of what Vulcan—and by extension Allen—have built in Seattle consists of market-rate housing, which under current market conditions has helped create a city more like Paul Allen, mostly male, mostly white software developers" (para. 19). Scruggs decried the now-homogenized neighborhood where diversity in culture and income levels had been eliminated. The effect that Allen and his billionaire contemporaries had on the neighborhood is stark, but can the cultural desert that is South Lake Union be blamed solely on them?

Consolidated Works: a South Lake Union Case Study

To understand South Lake Union's modern development curve, it is worth studying one of the last cultural organizations in the neighborhood before the major commercial development of the late 2000s. Consolidated Works (or "ConWorks") was a multidisciplinary arts center founded in 1999. The name reflected their intent to become "a consolidation of the best work in town under one roof" (Wiecking, 1999). This included "theater, film, visual art, music, lectures and events in a space integrating an art gallery, a theater, a cinema, an event hall, and several studio spaces" (AERP, 2020).

While ConWorks opened to much fanfare and community excitement, the organization's founders already knew they would have to relocate, as their donated building at 410 Terry Avenue North was set to be demolished in a few months (Wiecking, 1999). ConWorks hit its artistic stride at its second home at 500 Boren Avenue. There, ConWork's program of exhibitions and productions began to garner recognition. One major accolade came in 2003, when ConWorks was awarded the Mayor's Arts Award for Excellence and Innovation by a Next Generation Arts Organization for their curatorial work (Kagen, 2017).

ConWorks would stay on Boren Avenue until 2006, when the city of Seattle mandated improvements to the 29,000 square foot building to improve seismic stability (Berson, 2006). Some claim that the cost of this structural work caused Consolidated Works to dissolve and is representative of a larger trend in the area. "Matthew Richter... counted 21 cultural spaces in South Lake Union in 2004, when he served as executive director of Consolidated Works, a studio/ gallery/ concert venue in the neighborhood. Today, we counted about eight" (Roth, 2016, para. 16).

Unable to afford the required improvements in a timely manner and unwilling to move, ConWorks shut its doors. Those are the official reasons given for the closure, there may have

been others. Although ConWorks officially closed in 2007, there was much discussion about the staffing and leadership changes that had taken place two years prior. A widely held opinion was that when Visual Arts Director Meg Shiffler left and founder and Executive Director Matt Richter was fired by the Executive Board in 2005, the artistic direction of ConWorks began to suffer (Kiley, 2006). A lack of cohesion and excitement characterized subsequent exhibits. “I don’t hear people talking about ConWorks anymore. It’s almost like it’s already gone” (Kiley, 2006, para. 6). This damning sentiment seemed to indicate that the loss of artistic leadership was a fatal flaw that no new facility or executive direction could repair. Allegations of interpersonal issues within ConWorks remained in dispute, leaving room for speculation (Farr, 2005).

The Arts Around South Lake Union

When reading local media coverage of South Lake Union, sometimes it is the missing elements that offer insight. Articles about the massive redevelopment of the area rarely mention the places lost: the cultural centers and diverse residential blocks replaced by office and industrial buildings and parking garages. Author Julie Monahan (2013) articulated this feeling of loss after compiling her own contemporary news coverage of Consolidated Works and the South Lake Union development. She put it succinctly in the title of her piece for *Seattle Magazine*, “Does South Lake Union Have A Soul?” Monahan interviewed activist and architect Peter Steinbrueck who emphasized the importance of the past in understanding South Lake Union. “What contributes to soul is not essentially what’s new. It’s remembering the past and the stories told in those remnants and vestiges... There’s something to be said for honoring what already exists there” (Monahan, 2013, para. 8). It is rare for a neighborhood to feel so culturally nebulous compared to its creative neighbors.

To the west of South Lake Union, Seattle Center lies at the foot of Queen Anne hill, filled with cultural facilities and artistic opportunities. Even this cultural development is relatively new; most of its major structures were built for the 1962 World's Fair: the iconic Space Needle, the Coliseum (now Climate Pledge Arena), fine arts pavilions and performing arts venues including the Opera House (now McCaw Hall) and the Playhouse (now the Cornish Playhouse). The area continued to accrue arts institutions like the Seattle Repertory Theatre housed in the Bagley Wright Theatre; and in more recent years, the Seattle Children's Theatre, the VERA Project, radio station KEXP, the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP), and many more (Seattle Center, n.d.). In comparison, South Lake Union has one standout museum, the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI), which moved into the former Naval Reserve Armory on the shore of Lake Union in 2012, during the massive commercial development of the area (Stein, 2002).

South Lake Union's eastern neighbor Capitol Hill also developed a diverse art scene. Beginning in the 1950s and over the next 70 years, Capitol Hill's Pike / Pine neighborhood became the densest arts neighborhood in the State of Washington. "The district is now home to over 40 arts and cultural organizations" (Office of Arts & Culture [OAC], n.d., para. 2). The neighborhood was designated Seattle's first Arts District in 2014 to combat dramatic gentrification that threatens its decentralized art spaces. In describing the Capitol Hill Arts District the City of Seattle's website sounded a familiar lament: "Capitol Hill is increasingly perceived as being in danger of losing its soul" (OAC, n.d., para. 3). If a famously artistic neighborhood is in danger of losing its soul despite decades of history, coupled with City support and general recognition of the value of its art, can a neighborhood whose cultural fabric has been neglected for more than 70 years hope for an artistic resurgence?

The Lost Arts Community of South Lake Union

The factors that influence how a neighborhood develops over time are innumerable and nuanced and do not occur in a vacuum. We cannot guess how South Lake Union would be different today had it not been choked by freeways and traffic starting in the 1950s (Crowley, 2003). Three main factors influence the success of arts organizations in a neighborhood like South Lake Union. An art space like Consolidated Works might have failed no matter where it was.

Traffic Shapes Everything

The surrounding freeways and the famously bad traffic in South Lake Union changed the area from a residential neighborhood by creating demand for the large parking lots and wide streets needed to absorb the traffic that spilled into the region. This kept South Lake Union from developing a neighborhood identity and building community, which in turn could have fostered the advocacy to protect it from purely profit-driven development. These issues may have arisen in the construction of the 1950s, but they have lingered on as is evident in this statement made in 2016: “Walking through the neighborhood is like navigating a maze — dodging closed sidewalks, construction equipment and trucks that rule the roads. A forest of decorated construction cranes dominates the skyline” (Roth, 2016, para. 13).

Affordable Space is a Basic Necessity

Though there is not a complete story as to why Consolidated Works closed, their tenure began in a soon-to-be-demolished building and ended eight years later in another building destined to be demolished. ConWorks’ organizational history is full of costly business decisions to relocate and build out new space, driven by lack of a stable location. Constant time and

financial pressure to find and hold onto space kept ConWorks from making business decisions that were in its best interest.

Creative Mission is Paramount

After its close, many fans of Consolidated Works pointed to the lack of inspiring art in its last few years as the reason for its failure. *The Stranger* announced its artistic demise a year before its official one. “It seems more like a glorified rental hall than an arts center these days—it lost something when Shiffler left and lost almost everything when Richter left and hasn’t made much of an artistic impression since” (Kiley, 2006, para. 6). The programming lacked cohesion and excitement and many claimed it suffered from severe mission drift, presenting a “grab bag of phoned-in favors [rather] than a multidisciplinary mission” (Kiley, 2006, para. 6). Audience discontent with what Consolidated Works produced and presented after it lost its artistic direction brings into question whether its end was due to internal changes or external pressures. Perhaps Consolidated Works had to move from South Lake Union to survive, but it seems to have lost sight of the paramount importance of its audience and the impact that unstable leadership can have on a once successful and dynamic arts organization.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Cay Lane, MFA 2021 for Seattle University’s MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman. Primary research was conducted during Spring Quarter, 2021. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.

Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

References

Arts Ecosystem Research Project. (2020). Consolidated Works. *Organizations*.

<https://www.seattleu.edu/artsecosystem/organizations/consolidated-works/>

Becker, P. (2007a, July 27). Lake Union (Seattle) tour. *HistoryLink.org Essay 8166*.

<https://www.historylink.org/File/8166>

Becker, P. (2007b, August 8). Seattle voters reject the Seattle Commons levy on September 19,

1995. *HistoryLink.org Essay 8252*. <https://www.historylink.org/File/8252>

Berson, M. (2006, December 7). Consolidated calls it quits. *The Seattle Times*.

<https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/consolidated-calls-it-quits/>

Crowley, W. (2003, June 8). South Lake Union: The Evolution of a dream. *HistoryLink.org*

Essay 4250. <https://www.historylink.org/File/4250>

Farr, S. (2005, March 10). Explanations differ in firing at ConWorks. *The Seattle Times*.

<https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/explanations-differ-in-firing-at-conworks/>

Florida Division of Arts & Culture. (n.d.). *Cultural Facilities*. Grant Programs.

<https://dos.myflorida.com/cultural/grants/grant-programs/cultural-facilities/>

Kagen, J. (2017, June 9). Vinson Cole, Art Corps, Consolidated Works, and the Allen

Foundation for the Arts receive the first Seattle Mayor's Arts Awards on August 29,

2003. *Historylink.org Essay 20390*. <https://www.historylink.org/File/20390>

Kiley, B. (2006, June 29). ConWorks homeless. *The Stranger*.

<https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/conworks-homeless/Content?oid=40071>

Monahan, J. (2013, March). Does South Lake Union have a soul? *Seattle Magazine*.

<https://www.seattlemag.com/article/does-south-lake-union-have-soul>

Office of Arts & Culture. (n.d.). *Arts & Cultural Districts*.

<https://www.seattle.gov/arts/programs/cultural-space/arts-and-cultural-districts>

Puget Sound Regional Council. (2013). *Regional Centers – Seattle South Lake Union RGC*

Profile 2013. <https://www.psrc.org/sites/default/files/rgc-profile-seattle-south-lake-union.pdf>

Roth, C. (2016). Is there still room for artists in Seattle? *Crosscut*. <https://features.crosscut.com/->

[is-there-still-room-for-artists-in-seattle](https://features.crosscut.com/-is-there-still-room-for-artists-in-seattle)

Scruggs, G. (2018, October 17). The nerd that ate Seattle. *Bloomberg CityLab*.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-17/paul-allen-s-seattle>

Seattle Center. (n.d.). *History*. About. <http://www.seattlecenter.com/about/history>

Stein, A. (2015, May 1). Museum of History & Industry. *HistoryLink.org Essay 3682*.

<https://www.historylink.org/file/3682>

The Seattle Times. (2003, April 27). The History of South Lake Union.

<https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=20030427&slug=slutimeline270>

Wiecking, S. (1999, October 7). Hoping Consolidated Works. *The Stranger*.

<https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/hoping-consolidated-works/Content?oid=2216>