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SOIL & Space: How Infrastructure Shaped SOIL Gallery's Identity

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Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

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Abstract

SOIL is a non-profit gallery and artists' collective in Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood that focuses on emerging artists and challenging art (Meade et al., 2005). Since its establishment in 1995, SOIL has resided in five different locations from the now-departed Erikson building across the street from the downtown Seattle Art Museum, to Capitol Hill and Pioneer Square. Despite this series of location changes, SOIL has maintained its prominence in Seattle's arts community. How did space influence SOIL's identity and how has it maintained that identity through a series of changes in facility and neighborhood? In a study of the 1990s national building boom in arts facilities, researchers found that mission-based decision-making, clear and consistent leadership, community engagement, and a facility that fit the organization's mission were key to an organization's long-term sustainability (University of Chicago Cultural Policy Center, 2012). For this case study, SOIL's success will be measured against metrics outlined by the University of Chicago's Cultural Policy Center in addition to comparison with like organizations in Seattle and across the country. Information regarding SOIL's transition from location to location while still retaining its identity has been acquired through interviews with SOIL's membership and data gathered from their website and records.

SOIL & Space: How Infrastructure Influenced SOIL Art Gallery's Mission

In 1995, a group of Seattle-based artists founded an artist-run co-op arts space which they named SOIL. From the start, SOIL structured itself as a non-hierarchical alternative to traditional not-for-profit arts spaces that followed the non-profit corporation model. SOIL's unique structure forced it to consult its internal community before making any changes, most important of which included its four moves between five facilities. Starting at the now-demolished Erikson Building, SOIL moved to the lower level of the old Elliot Bay Book Company; then into a basement shared with a boxing club; later down the street into a Capitol Hill gallery space; and finally, into the Tashiro Kaplan Building (Meade et al., 2005). Despite the plethora of transitions, SOIL managed to maintain its identity and expand both its internal membership and external network over 26 years. In a national study of the building boom in arts facilities during the 1990s, researchers found that the long-term success of a capital project depended on clear and consistent leadership, community engagement, and a facility that matched the organization's artistic mission (University of Chicago Cultural Policy Center, 2012). SOIL's long-term success in maintaining its identity despite its frequent moves connected directly to its relationship with the facilities it occupied. But those facilities also shaped SOIL's identity.

History

SOIL's story starts at the Erikson Building's end. In 1903, the Erikson was built next to University Street, between First Avenue and the waterfront. Ninety years later, University Street was rebuilt as the Harbor Steps, a terraced public park (Takesuye, 2002). The Erikson Building was slated for demolition, to make way for Harbor Properties' condominium construction (Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, n.d.). SOIL moved in knowing that the building would soon be demolished, but the rent would be cheap. Initially, SOIL had held pop-up exhibitions in a variety of spaces, but it gained traction as an organization during its

occupation of the Erikson Building from August 1996 to November 1998. Artists and longtime SOIL members Margie Livingston and Ellen Ziegler recalled SOIL's first year in the Erikson, each remarking on the grandiosity of the space that would permit multiple large shows to take place under one roof. While the space allowed for larger shows, it also attracted more members; both joined SOIL when it moved into the Erikson space (personal communication, March 3, 2021). Though it had its benefits, the Erikson's impermanence led to SOIL's numerous moves.

In the next five years, SOIL would move three times. First it migrated to a space below the old Elliot Bay Book Company in Pioneer Square. Longtime member Margie Livingston recalled this space, noting that SOIL members with and without carpentry skills built it out to suit their needs.

After a year SOIL vacated the space because it was too small (SOIL, n.d.). Livingston also recalled the subsequent moves into the two Capitol Hill locations, noting that they were larger but that the first was, "really kind of hysterical. Classic artists' space, talk about gritty." The space had an odd interior layout; getting to the gallery involved walking around a boxing ring and there was a closet in the middle of the gallery (personal communication, March 3, 2021).

Ultimately rent became too much for the quality of space, and SOIL moved to 1317 Pine Street (SOIL, n.d.), a space that boasted a storefront and more traditional gallery layout. Livingston looked back fondly on SOIL's Capitol Hill years, stating, "when we'd have an opening, it would be like, just our neighborhood. You know, it would be just for SOIL, and it would be very... sweet and like a party and you would know everybody there" (personal communication, March 3, 2021). Though the neighborhood felt inviting to SOIL's membership, the rising rent and threat of redevelopment still loomed.

SOIL made its fifth and final move in 2004, to the Tashiro Kaplan Building. Livingston stated that “the Tashiro Kaplan was a way for us to be in a space that wouldn't be developed out from underneath us, because it's an arts building. There's a stability there...Development [has] only become more intense in the years of SOIL's existence” (personal communication, March 3, 2021). For decades, the Tashiro Kaplan Building was a four-story hardware store, an island of stability in the Pioneer Square neighborhood (Andrews & Link, 2005). Artspace acquired the building and undertook a \$16.5 million historic preservation and renovation project, transforming the old hardware store into 50 units of live/work space for artists and their families and 40,000 square feet of commercial space (Vandenbrink, n.d.). Artspace offered SOIL a storefront space with the promise of a ten-year lease and fixed rent for that term. Though smaller than their Capitol Hill gallery, it had high ceilings and a unique layout that supported SOIL's artistic expressions. As of this writing, (2021) SOIL remains in this location. Interviewees knew of no plans to move.

Five Facilities, One Mission

To sustain a not-for-profit artists' collective and gallery for 26 years is a great feat. To survive five facility transitions and changes in membership every few years while remaining true to its original mission is another accomplishment. A strong sense of mission, clear and effective leadership, flexibility in generating revenue and discipline in controlling expenses are key components to organizational success (University of Chicago Cultural Policy Center, 2012). In addition to this, community relevance, artistic vibrancy, and capitalization are key components to organizational sustainability (Brown et al., 2011). SOIL meets these parameters of success through its leadership, financial responsibility, ambitious network, and overall flexibility.

Many arts collectives/galleries elect to incorporate as 501(c)3 nonprofits or limited liability corporations (LLCs). Some examples are Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery (LLC),

Student Art Spaces (nonprofit), Seattle Art Post (LLC), Tiger Strikes Asteroid (nonprofit), and Center on Contemporary Art (nonprofit). The advantage of these organizational structures is the ability to gain revenue through grants and tax-deductible donations for a nonprofit, or through earned income for an LLC. The downside is that both limit an organization's flexibility. The inflexible nature of nonprofits lies in their structure: a board, a director, and a team of staff. Without board approval, the director cannot help the staff to achieve the mission and if the board, staff, and director don't all agree on the organization's mission, the organization cannot function effectively.

An LLC, on the other hand, does away with a board structure and operates as a business, charging admission to events, selling artworks on commission (taking a cut of the sale price), offering space rentals, and other capitalization techniques. However, an LLC must rely on revenue generated for the majority of its income and is only eligible for a few grants, not enough to sustain the organization.

SOIL operates outside of the 501(c)3 and the LLC models, instead opting for a co-operative structure without the hierarchy of a board, while technically a nonprofit eligible for various grant opportunities. SOIL depends on a consensus of its members to make decisions; it reinvigorates its membership every few years by reopening applications to the Seattle community; and diversifies its income all while meeting the requirements for a not-for-profit co-op.

Though SOIL is non-hierarchical, i.e., has no one leader, it still maintains clear direction through the strength of support for the decisions made collectively by the members. Livingston remarked that SOIL's structure "is easily malleable to whatever the current membership wants to do so, we've thought a couple times about changing that to be more formal with a board of directors, but that splits up the power and that has never felt desirable"

(personal communication, March 3, 2021). Current co-op member Ziegler described the leadership style of SOIL:

We don't need a board. You know we're kind of...like a commune in that we make our decisions in a group. And we don't always agree, but more and more we do agree. There are personalities that are more forceful than others. And then there are some of us, some that are very quiet. We are not interfered with in terms of what we can and can't show. The trajectory of SOIL has had a lot to do with the fact that people who are doing really interesting work that's not commercially viable have found a place to show work. (personal communication, March 3, 2021)

Ziegler alluded to a unified sense of mission to show the work of artists otherwise without a home for their art, and that this influenced all group decisions.

Sometimes, like now we have all these new members who have a ton of energy, and there were times where people just didn't even come to meetings for effort, but...we've learned to choose members who are enthusiastic. (personal communication, March 3, 2021)

Another member, Bradley Gunn, added that,

Membership is... a little bit fluid in that...sometimes people have a lot of time on their hands and can take on projects and sometimes they don't and sort of life happens and people kind of go in and out, but there's typically about around 20 of us. (personal communication, March 3, 2021)

All three interviewees remarked that whenever SOIL adds new members, it has a renewed sense of purpose and tends to tackle large projects that bring SOIL back to its mission. Despite existing for over two decades, SOIL has maintained its original spirit. Looking back on its first location, Ziegler recalled, “[It] was really funky and quirky in there. And so [SOIL] kind of had the same energy that it does now, although it's been here for 25

years now” (personal communication, March 3, 2021). Though rather uncommon, SOIL’s leadership structure has functioned well for the organization and contributed to its stability through facility changes.

Facilities have not come easy for SOIL. During its first decade, it bounced around from a large, adaptable but temporary gallery space, to a tiny basement that needed work, to a half-boxing ring half-arts space, to a pricey gallery space on Capitol Hill, to finally land at the Tashiro Kaplan Building (Meade et al., 2005). As a fledgling organization, SOIL did not take on large facilities projects or purchase a building. Its membership chose to rent space after space until it could find the right home. As of 2021, SOIL had a ten-year lease in Tashiro Kaplan with the intention to renew for another ten. As Livingston put it, “We don’t have the capital to own a building...Owning a building requires more money. We’d have to be fancier, we’d have to have a board... we have a very loose structure” (personal communication, March 3, 2021). Livingston’s comment reflects SOIL’s realistic understanding of its finances and capacity. “The question of the appropriate organizational structure typically comes when artists wish to take their work to a larger scale and/or when artists decide to commit to a community long-term and require a designated space they can control and program consistently” (Jackson, 2012, p. 5). Continuing to lease in the Tashiro Kaplan fit SOIL’s organizational structure.

SOIL adapted to the spaces it occupied as it figured out what would be appropriate for the organization going forward. Selecting a facility that met organizational needs and financial ability and eschewing large capital projects contributed to SOIL’s success. At its first location, the Erikson, SOIL took advantage of the cheap rent at the soon-to-be demolished building in order to have a grand space to host larger scale shows and gain more community attention (Meade et al., 2005). Once time was up there, SOIL relocated to a smaller location and built their own fixtures to make the most of a tiny gallery space (M.

Livingston, personal communication, March 3, 2021). Soon realizing the space was too small to support their mission, and rather than compromise their potential artistic impact, SOIL elected to move to a facility that would better support them. At that first Capitol Hill location, SOIL had enough space and community connections to hold an art auction (Meade, 2005). According to all of the interviewees, this auction is now SOIL's greatest source of funds and one of its main attractions.

As SOIL grew, it evolved from a desire for any space that would fit, to a space with a more professional image, and moved into its second Capitol Hill location, this time an official gallery space (M. Livingston, personal communication, March 3, 2021). At its fourth location, SOIL established more regular programming which gained the attention of Artspace and led to a long-term lease in the Tashiro Kaplan Building (Meade et al., 2005). Tashiro Kaplan offered stability, affordability, a community of artists, and a professional image. Gunn described the physical facility: "the little cross bracing and structural retrofit does provide a nice little separation between... [the front and back] spaces" (personal communication, March 3, 2021). Although small, this layout allowed SOIL's members to simultaneously mount solo and group shows, with storage and office space beyond the gallery space. Gunn went on to say, "I think [it] kind of fits and is a good reflection of the model and the structure of the overall program" (personal communication, March 3, 2021). The Tashiro Kaplan space permitted SOIL to accomplish its mission without exceeding its means.

In each of its locations, SOIL developed a different relationship with the surrounding community. Livingston felt that SOIL had a stronger sense of local community when it resided on Capitol Hill as "everybody kind of knew each other" (personal communication, March 3, 2021). When it returned to Pioneer Square, SOIL needed to build that level of personal connection with the neighborhood residents and businesses. During that period,

SOIL invested time in cultivating a broader national community. Gunn remarked that “in 2017...we were doing a lot of projects and... trying to connect with other artist-run spaces around the country and sort of doing a lot of exchange shows” (personal communication, March 3, 2021). The growing homeless population also had an impact on the neighborhood. Ziegler stated,

The economy and the population of Pioneer Square has really changed... There's a lot more drug use, or a lot more people actually dealing out of their tents. A lot of people peeing in our doorway and pooping in our doorway, and you know as much as we like to support the community, no matter who it is, it gets to be a real pain, that kind of stuff. (personal communication, March 3, 2021)

Community engagement affects an organization's sustainability and, while SOIL had connections within Seattle and beyond, its relationship with the Pioneer Square neighborhood was strained. While the economic status and the population change of Pioneer Square was outside of SOIL's control, the situation severely impacted SOIL's mission. When this case study was conducted in 2021, SOIL had no intention of relocating. Members accommodated their houseless neighbors. “Some of us who are older or just more chill would invite the person in, and explain the work. And they'd walk around and they felt like they were being heard, and that they were being treated in a dignified way” (M. Livingston, personal communication, March 3, 2021).

Whether and how long an organization stays in one location depends not only on the facility, but the people in and outside of the organization. Since SOIL possessed effective leadership, affordable space that served its mission, and the ability to connect with people outside of the organization to achieve that mission, the organization found success. The Tashiro Kaplan succeeded as a vehicle for SOIL's mission and a home for the organization.

The Future

After surviving for two decades, SOIL found itself at a pivotal point: would it continue at the Tashiro Kaplan, or be forced to consider an alternative venue? During interviews with three of SOIL's current and past members, this question emerged in discussions of increasing financial and political struggles.

An arts organization's ability to sustain itself into the future depends upon its ability to garner capital and to keep up with the changing demands of society (Brown et al., 2011). While donations, grants, and annual fundraising auctions accounted for the majority of SOIL's capital, its fourth pillar appeared shaky. SOIL relied on membership dues to make up the remainder of its budget, yet these dues had not changed over its 26 years. "They're still at \$35 a month, and people still have trouble paying them" (M. Livingston, personal communication, March 3, 2021). While SOIL has fortunately been able to balance its budget without increasing dues, it is uncertain how much longer auction donations and grants can sustain the organization, especially if rent goes up with each new lease at the Tashiro Kaplan.

Not only do SOIL's finances pose a potential threat to its future, but political struggles do as well. Two of the interviewees expressed concern for SOIL's lack of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) in its membership, stating that SOIL had actively tried to include Black and Indigenous artists and succeeded in doing so with individual shows, but could not sustain these relationships beyond that. Reasons for this could not be garnered from the short interviews. It is possible to speculate that the problem may lie in SOIL's inherent biases. Given the importance of increasing BIPOC inclusion in all organizations, it will be up to SOIL to diversify its membership or risk being left behind as the rest of society moves towards a more inclusive future.

Conclusion

SOIL's success in sustaining its mission and status in the Seattle community for the past 26 years comes from its continually refreshed membership, adaptability to new locations, diversified income sources, and ambition to grow its network. Its cooperative organizational structure is unusual but effective. The facility SOIL occupies is nothing fancy, yet its open floor plan, simple structure, and long-term affordability meet SOIL's needs. Growing organizational concerns with diminishing revenue from member dues and the implications of the organization's lack of BIPOC membership cloud its future viability. Will SOIL successfully navigate its current trials, or will these be the downfall of one of Seattle's oldest arts collectives? Only time can tell.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Alexandra Mielcarek, MFA 2022 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman. Interviews were conducted with Bradley Gunn, artist/architect and Ellen Ziegler, artist, current members of SOIL; and Margie Livingston, artist and former member of SOIL. Primary research was conducted during Spring Quarter, 2021. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

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