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Pamala Mijatov

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Pamala Mijatov

Seattle University

Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

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Abstract

Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood was established in the late 19th century as an enclave for the well-to-do. By the 1970s, the neighborhood had declined, its handsome buildings filled with cheap apartments, vacant lofts and storefronts. Artists flocked there to establish theater and dance companies, studios, galleries, and other fringe arts spaces. Capitol Hill Housing Improvement Program (CHHIP), founded as a Public Development Authority in 1976, bought up old, under-maintained buildings and renovated them into affordable housing. Within three decades, these two forces remade Capitol Hill into a dense, walkable, culturally rich neighborhood, ripe for gentrification. New construction and skyrocketing rents displaced residents and cultural spaces that made the neighborhood attractive in the first place. CHHIP, now Capitol Hill Housing (CHH), collaborated with neighborhood arts organizations to develop the site of a Seattle Police Department parking lot into a multiuse complex of 88 subsidized apartments; commercial and office space; a shared parking garage; and two black box theaters. 12th Avenue Arts succeeded because it responded to the specific needs of a complex community at a critical point in time.

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The Neighborhood

Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood was established in the late 19th century as an enclave for the well-to-do (Caldbeck, 2011). Grand Victorian homes and expansive parks were platted out, Nellie Cornish opened a music school, and by 1915 automobile dealers — then an expensive novelty — were clustered in brick buildings along East Pike and East Pine Streets, an area then known as “Auto Row.” Furniture dealers and interior decorators flocked to the area to serve the wealthy households; “Auto Row,” “Furniture Row,” and “Decorators Row,” with their spacious showrooms and fine architecture made the Broadway and Pike/Pine area a prosperous commercial district.

However, by the 1970s, much of the “old money” was in the process of dying off or moving to the suburbs, and the mansions, auto repair shops, and warehouses were being partitioned off and rented cheaply as “bachelor” apartments and work spaces. Capitol Hill Housing Improvement Program (CHHIP) was founded as a Public Development Authority in 1976 to rehabilitate what was then a neighborhood falling into disrepair, with the mission of buying up old and under-maintained building stock and renovating it into affordable housing. Drawn by cheap apartments and a glut of vacant light-industrial warehouses, artists flocked to Capitol Hill and established new companies, studios, galleries, and other fringe arts spaces.

Within thirty years, CHHIP shortened its name to Capitol Hill Housing (CHH) and prepared to address a new challenge. Due in part, to CHHIP's success at revitalization and community improvement, Capitol Hill was by then a dense, walkable, culturally rich neighborhood close to downtown, and was experiencing intense pressure from gentrification

(Capitol Hill Housing, 2010). A luxury apartment building boom and skyrocketing rents displaced existing residents and forced closures of the cultural spaces that initially attracted newcomers to the neighborhood. CHH, skilled at urban redevelopment, needed new tools for community preservation.

The Idea

For decades, the Seattle Police Department (SPD) used a site at 12th Avenue and East Pine Street as a fueling station and a surface parking lot for about 70 vehicles. CHH had long felt that an affordable housing development would be a higher use for this space, but SPD had little inclination to sell, insisting that they not only needed all the parking spaces, but would need at least double that number in a replacement facility, which would make a joint housing/parking project prohibitively expensive (jseattle, 2009). CHH and SPD were in a stalemate.

In 2007, Oddfellow's Hall, which had long been renting artist studios and performance spaces at below-market rates, was sold for \$8.5 million, a price that mandated the new owners charge much higher rents. Some arts tenants were offered rent increases of up to 300 percent (Cohen, 2014). Almost all of the Oddfellows artists and arts organizations were forced to vacate, including Freehold Theatre, Seattle Mime Theatre, and Velocity Dance Center. Among them, they had operated five affordable 50-100 seat performance venues in the building. Around the same time, the Union Garage and the NW Actors' Studio also closed, eliminating another three 50-seat houses.

In early 2008, responding to the public outcry over the redevelopment of Oddfellows Hall, Seattle City Council members Nick Licata and Sally Clark hosted a series of community meetings to discuss the creation of a Cultural Overlay District (COD) on Capitol

Hill, a special zoning district with incentives and regulations to facilitate retaining existing spaces and developing new ones for arts and culture activities (Caldbick, 2013). The following year the City Council passed legislation creating the COD.

Michael Seiwerath (then the Executive Director of Northwest Film Forum, now the Director of Community Programs and External Relations for CHH) noted that community members were rattled. He said, “After Oddfellows sold ... there were a lot of meetings about ‘How do we stop this from happening again?’ Everybody saw the way real estate was going on Capitol Hill.” CHH Executive Director Christopher Persons remembered the abandoned police parking lot proposal, and wondered if an affordable arts element could be added. Persons said, “I pulled out the file and literally dusted it off. I knew this was something we had to do. The project just made sense, and a 29,000-square-foot surface parking lot in the epicenter of perhaps the city’s most vibrant neighborhood did not” (“The Long-Awaited 12th Avenue Arts,” 2014). Seattle’s Cultural Space Liaison Matthew Richter remembers that as the turning point for the project, saying, “The change of name and adding the arts space is what did it. The arts component made it exciting to sell to the Mayor as something he could cut the ribbon on” (personal communication, March, 2017). As Richter notes, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Mayors like to cut ribbons.

CHH began to lobby then-Mayor Mike McGinn. In 2010, he visited the site and CHH pitched their vision. CHH convinced McGinn and secured his support, and since construction costs were depressed due to the recession, it was an ideal time to strike. With the backing of Mayor McGinn and Councilmembers Licata and Clark, CHH was able to win concessions from SPD on the number of parking stalls, secure a promise of city housing funds, and get a first major gift for the capital campaign. The project was off the ground.

Convening the Community

CHH hired consultant Randy Engstrom of Reflex Strategies to conduct a series of community panels and interviews with neighborhood artists and arts groups, in order to understand what kind of performance spaces the community truly needed, wanted, and would champion. Engstrom convened a 12th Avenue Arts Advisory Committee in the summer of 2011 with representatives from Capitol Hill arts organizations who would be directly affected, like Velocity Dance Center, Annex Theatre, and Northwest Film Forum. Engstrom also invited arts leaders from successful organizations elsewhere in the city, to gather input and best practices from high-performing organizations like On the Boards and Theatre Off Jackson, and artist services organizations Theatre Puget Sound, 4Culture, and Shunpike (L. A. Smith, personal communication, July, 2011).

Listening and responding to these constituents' feedback was integral to the project's planning. For example, the initial proposal floated by CHH had a single, 200-300 seat, proscenium theater. But Bret Fetzer, then the Artistic Director of Annex Theatre and an experienced self-producing artist, insisted that 300 seats was too much capacity for most small arts groups to fill, and that 50-100 seat houses would better serve Seattle's needs (personal communication, May, 2017). The next proposal incorporated his feedback, with one 149-seat theater with raked fixed seating and one much smaller "black box." But advisory committee members kept pushing for more flexibility; the final plan, directly responding to the panel's feedback, had two performance spaces sized for 80 and 150 seats, both of which were flexible black boxes (B. Fetzer, personal communication, August, 2011).

In 2011, CHH released a request for proposals for a Performance Space Management Organization, seeking a single organization with demonstrated financial capacity and high

quality of work, and a commitment to accessibility, collaboration, and compatibility with CHH's values. CHH received two proposals: one from Annex Theatre + Theatre Off Jackson (two established companies with tenuous leases in their current facilities), and the second from Strawberry Theatre Workshop (Strawshop), New Century Theatre Company (NCTC), and Washington Ensemble Theatre (WET), who proposed creating a conglomerate organization called Black Box Operations. (In 2011, Washington Ensemble held the lease on a 50-seat space in North Capitol Hill, and Strawshop and NCTC were nomadic.) After an extensive written application and an interview with CHH staff, Black Box Operations' proposal was selected. CHH now had not one, but three principal tenants who would rally their individual audience bases to support the project.

As Engstrom was surveying the neighborhood arts community, CHH was negotiating with SPD about parking stall design, and reaching out to other not-for-profit organizations. CHH's lease on its own office space was expiring soon, so it planned to move its offices to the new development, and it saw another set of community partners it could include in its coalition. CHH secured commitments for long-term leases from several other local (mostly creative-based) not-for-profit organizations, and a partnership request from Seattle Academy of Arts and Sciences, a private middle and high school two blocks south of the new development.

The Multi-Use Design

After wrangling all of the constituents, the completed plan for the 12th Avenue Arts project had 88 units of subsidized housing on the four topmost floors, and three market-rate commercial spaces on the ground floor, a pairing that's becoming typical in urban housing developments. It also had a SPD-controlled, fully-secured, private underground garage on

the north side of the facility with 111 stalls to replace the surface parking lot, as promised. The transformative aspect of 12th Avenue Arts was its first and second floors: two black box performance spaces in the back half of the first floor; an airy double-height lobby between the commercial spaces and theaters; and a floor of office spaces, classrooms, and conference rooms on the second floor to provide sound insulation between the theaters and the residences above. The offices, classrooms, and conference rooms would keep the building activated during the day, and the commercial spaces and theaters on nights and weekends. The residences and police parking had separate entrances on the north end of the building, away from the busy public spaces on the south end, to maintain SPD's security and residents' privacy and sense of ownership.

The Capital Package

Because 12th Avenue Arts had an unusually large number of stakeholders, it also had the challenge and opportunity of assembling a financing package from multiple sources, including several that were new to Capitol Hill Housing's toolkit.

- The residential units secured funding from typical CHH sources: the Seattle City Housing Levy, Washington's State Housing Trust Fund, and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits.
- The commercial spaces brought in New Market Tax Credits and a HUD Section 108 loan, based on the number of jobs being created by the three new restaurants.
- SPD sold the lot, but leases back the completed parking garage.

The theaters, however, required a completely different funding model. Building out those spaces required a \$4.5 million capital campaign that couldn't be covered by the affordable housing tax credits and HUD funds, so CHH hired Michael Seiwerath to run the

arts-space campaign using traditional not-for-profit fundraising techniques. He turned to funders and strategies he knew well from his experience with Northwest Film Forum and his years in the Capitol Hill arts community: State of Washington Building for the Arts funding, local foundation grants, private donations, business sponsorships, and community events. Seiwerrath hosted community get-togethers at local bars and private house parties with arts philanthropists, with special guests like Tim Keck, the publisher of *The Stranger* weekly newspaper (jseattle, 2011). CHH hosted a fundraising gala in the fall of 2011, Omnivorous, in which “a variety of the Hill’s best food and drink purveyors” made significant in-kind donations to a swanky tasting event, including Anchovies & Olives, Lark, Fran’s Chocolates, Marjorie, Poppy, Monsoon, Tango, Zoe/Quinn’s, and many more.

Seiwerrath enlisted the aid of Jason Lajeunesse, who owns several nightclubs and restaurants in the neighborhood and produces the Capitol Hill Block Party. Aware of the necessity of a vibrant local culture, he was a vocal supporter. “Block Party has a responsibility to the area as a whole,” Lajeunesse said. “Capitol Hill was called one of the top twelve arts neighborhoods in the country. In order to maintain that, artists need the ability to live and work in the neighborhood. You need things like 12th Avenue Arts, you need Capitol Hill Housing, you need affordable spaces so that can happen” (Wilson, 2013). He put capital campaign donation materials in all of his clubs and restaurants, hosted parties, and even offered up the Capitol Hill Block Party ticket platform as a fundraising tool, allowing CHBP patrons to add donations for 12th Avenue Arts during checkout for online CHBP ticket purchases (Wilson, 2013).



Caffe Vita sold hats to help raise funds for 12th Avenue Arts and promote the Capitol Hill Arts District.

With the support of the Hill’s heavy hitters, and encouragement from the patrons of the three tenant organizations and neighborhood arts groups, many other Capitol Hill businesses were looking for ways to help. Seiwerath had made a great case for the arts as a force-multiplier, and essential to the character of Capitol Hill. He tapped into the concerns of business owners: “How do we keep the funky fabric of Capitol Hill? How do we retain our soul?” (“The Long-Awaited 12th Avenue Arts,” 2014).

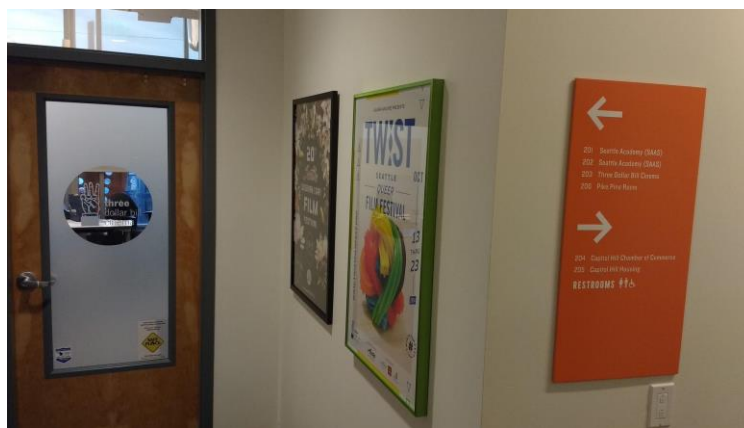
Thanks to the enthusiastic support of neighborhood businesses and arts groups, the capital campaign was successful. The completed facility has a feature that is common in arts spaces but unusual for affordable housing and commercial developments: a donor wall, displaying the names of all of the campaign donors, including foundations, businesses, and individuals.



Donor wall in 12th Avenue Arts lobby. Photos by Pamala Mijatov.

Opening the Facility

The 12th Avenue Arts development broke ground in February 2013 (jseattle, 2013), and the facility opened to the community with a public party in October 2014. The inclusion of arts space, and the extensive community outreach required to plan and fund it, helped make 12th Avenue Arts a highly-valued community asset. As of 2017, the residential units were at 100 percent capacity, there had been no turnover in commercial spaces, and the arts spaces were fully booked a year in advance.



Office space for Three Dollar Bill Cinema on the second floor, with festival posters and directional signage. Photo by Pamala Mijatov.



Pre-show diners at Pel Meni Dumpling Tzar on a Saturday night, before a performance of “Bright Half Life” at New Century Theatre Company. Dumpling Tzar displays Queer Pride Flags above the windows, and the signage is visually tied to the 12th Avenue Arts marquee. Velocity Dance Center is visible across the street. Photo by Pamala Mijatov.

Could We Build It Again?

Given the success of the 12th Avenue Arts project, is it likely that we’ll see arts spaces popping up in other affordable-housing developments? Cultural Space Liaison Matthew Richter is optimistic. Subsidized housing and subsidized cultural space are a natural pairing, he says, and could provide a solution for developers struggling to fill ground-floor commercial spaces in affordable housing facilities. “They have no idea how to use it,” he says. “In most mixed-use facilities, they use the ground floor as an amenity to aid lease-out, to make it more attractive to potential residents upstairs. But affordable housing isn’t seeking tenants – they have a wait list. It’s hard to find the right retail for those buildings.” (personal communication, March, 2017)

Charles Romero, an architect who specializes in affordable housing developments, doesn't disagree, but adds this caveat: You can't put anything into a building without first determining what the community truly needs and will support. Romero is currently working on an affordable-housing project in the Othello neighborhood and says that the residents in that area, which tend toward larger, low-income families, likely have other priorities such as an on-site medical clinic or teen center. In all of his projects, Romero tries to take to the street and survey the neighbors about what they need in a new facility, convening community forums and hosting design charrettes. "I don't think you can be too generous," he says. "It's not our role to pretend we know what the need is, but to suggest a direction and ask questions" (personal communication, March 9, 2017)

Both Richter and Romero say it's wrong to assume any community doesn't want cultural spaces, but it will probably look a little different than the black boxes and bars that worked so well on Capitol Hill. 12th Avenue Arts succeeded because it was responsive to the specific needs of its unique constituents at a specific point in time. Any new development would have to go through the same investigation process, without predetermined expectations, to find out what will work there. Romero and Richter acknowledge that many communities lack the direct access to City Hall that Capitol Hill had. Richter says "they don't speak with as loud of a voice, so you have to do more work to find them" (personal communication, March, 2017). However, finding them, and truly listening, is essential to the success of the project. "You have to trust the community to decide," says Romero. "If you provide spaces that people care for, they make them their own, and it's a huge value-add" (personal communication, March 9, 2017).

Chris Persons is excited about the possibilities that the success of 12th Avenue Arts

opens up for CHH – not just for arts spaces, but for any new project that addresses cultural placemaking through the vehicle of affordable housing. He finds developers are much more responsive to creative ideas now. “If you would’ve suggested that four or five years ago, people would say ‘We can’t do that.’ Now people are saying, ‘That’s interesting, let’s see if we can look at that’” (Cohen, 2015).

Editor’s Note:

In 2020, Capitol Hill Housing changed its name to Roots Community Housing. It continues to manage 12th Avenue Arts and to develop and operate affordable housing projects on Capitol Hill and throughout metropolitan Seattle.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Pamala Mijatov, MFA 2017 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 Bret Fetzer, independent filmmaker, grants administrator for 4Culture, and former Artistic Director of Annex Theatre; Matthew Richter, Seattle’s Cultural Space Liaison; and Charles Romero, architect; and Leigh Ann Smith on behalf of Randy Engstrom, Director of Seattle’s Office of Arts and Culture and former consultant for 12th Avenue Arts; as part of this research during Winter Quarter, 2017. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

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