



South Waterfront Developers fill gap in public funding for the arts

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From sold out shows at the Schnitzer to Pearl District galleries full of revelers on first Thursdays, Portlanders love the arts.

But nurturing and encouraging the city's creative community costs money. And according to Williams and Dame developer Homer Williams, that money is not coming from the government.

"The state's not doing their job," Williams said. "It's incumbent on the private side to step up. People buying expensive houses have art in their homes, but that's not true of the working poor. We need art that a community can share."

That's why Williams and other developers of property in the city's South Waterfront district are sticking up for the arts in order to foster that growing neighborhood.

Oregon ranks 47th of the 50 states for the amount of money it allocates to the arts, according to a 2006 report by the Oregon Arts Commission. And although the city of Portland's investment in the arts exceeds the state's, the city's support is down from previous years.

Local non-profit group Literary Arts, for example, receives 15 percent of its funding from government entities and foundations, said Elizabeth Burnett, the group's executive director.

By comparison, 36 percent of the group's funding come from individuals and businesses, contributions that flow along the lines of the effort by Williams' company and another local developer, Gerding Edlen Development.

The two companies, which have partnered on South Waterfront projects like the Atwater, the John Ross Tower and the Meriwether condominiums, have joined forces with Literary Arts to bring three winners of the Oregon Book Awards to the growing waterfront neighborhood for a reading, happening tonight at the waterfront's Artist-in-Residence AiR studio in the John Ross.

"What's exciting is we haven't worked with (Gerding Edlen) before," Burnett said. "I'm hoping its opening a door for future collaboration."

Tonight's literary reading is just one facet of how developers have been busy fostering the arts at the waterfront. Williams & Dame recently hosted the Gaden Shartse Monks, who built a traditional meditation symbol called a Sand Mandala at the AiR studio. More than 100 people attended the two-day event.

Then there's performance artist Linda K. Johnson, who approached Williams and developer Mark Edlen in 2007 with the idea of creating an artist-in-residency program for the burgeoning district. Williams and Edlen agreed to give Johnson a stipend and a 2,000-square-foot, un-leased retail space as a temporary studio.

"It's really amazing that Mark wanted to cultivate an artist-in-residence program," Burnett said. "To me, that's really wonderful out-of-the-box thinking that recognizes that arts are important to community-building."

The AiR studio has hosted musician Tim DuRoche, writer Dmae Roberts and choreographer Tahni Holt in the past six months and has a full roster of visiting artists through this August.

Real-estate company Realty Trust Group, which helped plan many of the properties in the South Waterfront area, has also been active in hosting symphonies, ballets and literary events in the district.

"At the waterfront, we had the river and the views," Todd Prendergast, principal director of the South Waterfront for Realty Trust Group, said. "The piece that would need support is establishing community. Art provides a point of interest and a focal point for existing residents in a way that helps to build community and make stronger connections which helps attract people to the district."

Though the financial benefits to developers who work with arts organizations are hard to quantify, Prendergast said the arts can only help a community's success.

"Go to any city that doesn't have a strong arts organization and you've got an environment where there's not as much demand to live in those areas," he said. "It takes more than building nice buildings for people to want to live somewhere."

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