



Portland's Precious Patron

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Here is the long, online version of my interview with Jim Winkler, the developer who put the DeSoto Project together.

The interview is being published in Sunday's O! The print edition features the shorter version of this interview.



The Portland art world's greatest need might not be more artists, curators, collectors and nonprofit groups. What it might really need is more financially savvy developers who can help pioneer ambitious projects and initiatives on its behalf.

Take Jim Winkler of Winkler Development Corp. In 2005, he bought the former Daisy Kingdom fabric store and warehouse on the North Park Blocks with plans of turning it into a multi-use art hub for galleries and nonprofits. The historic complex, called the DeSoto Project, opens today.

Led by Winkler's combination of artistic vision and unflinching business savvy, the project's five participating galleries and nonprofits - Augen Gallery, Blue Sky Gallery, Charles Hartman Fine Art, Froelick Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Craft - have gained the one thing that eludes many art businesses: the security of home ownership, and prime condominium retail space on the cusp of the Pearl District and Old Town, no less. (LRS Architects owns the building's top two floors.)

Using his business knowledge for an art project of such scale is a first for Winkler, who made a modest profit off of the DeSoto. Still, the 57-year-old developer went into the project having already cultivated a long history of involvement with the city's art scene. He's been an active collector of art, in particular photography, and has been a generous patron of the Portland Art Museum and Blue Sky. (Every month, Winkler buys a print from each Blue Sky show, which he then donates to the museum.)

The son of Polish parents who survived the Holocaust and emigrated to Oregon when Winkler was a child, Winkler attended Brown University, where he studied moral philosophy and religion. It was while attending Brown that Winkler went to his first art museum.

After graduation, Winkler entertained becoming a philosophy professor but moved back to Oregon when his father, a successful scrap metal dealer, fell ill. Eventually, Winkler attended law school at Lewis & Clark College and became one of the city's more successful developers. His past and current projects span the length of the city and range from affordable housing complexes to Adidas Village.

Recently, Winkler spoke with The Oregonian and offered his thoughts on the DeSoto Project, the art world and how the business world can help the art world.

The interview was edited for clarity and conciseness. A longer version of this interview is online at www.oregonlive.com/entertainment.

Q: You've developed many projects in your career. Would it be accurate to say none has been like this one?

A: Yes, it would - none quite like this one. When I think about them (projects) in general, they usually start with some sort of goal. They're either about money or about a charity. Or they're designed to achieve some social objective. This (the DeSoto) is more similar to the latter in the sense that one day I was looking at art at Blue Sky when I was approached by Bruce Guenther (the Portland Art Museum's chief curator), who asked: "What are we going to do about Blue Sky?" What he meant was: What happens to Blue Sky if its rent escalates or if it experiences some financial stress - Blue Sky is, of course, a nonprofit art gallery, not a commercial one.

That caused me to think about the galleries in general: What would happen if they had ownership options as opposed to just rental options? At that time, few galleries owned their spaces. Then I made a comment to Bruce: We ought to generalize the idea, take it to a certain scale, see how many galleries can take advantage of a critical mass. So, the notion was: Could we create an opportunity for the galleries, and could we do it in a location that was interesting, that could, perhaps, catalyze a neighborhood? And could we do it in a way to make purchasing or financing somewhat easy?

Q: The participants in the DeSoto signed some covenants. Can you tell us about them?

A: Yes, the DeSoto has some covenants that promise each participant would have to resell their spaces to

another gallery, if they were to ever sell them.

Q: What are the other covenants?

A: That's essentially it. The reason for the covenant was: If you go to such effort to do something, then you want it to remain even after you're gone.

Q: Every dealer involved with the DeSoto says the project couldn't have happened without your leadership and expertise. Even taking into account your devotion to Blue Sky, this project was a huge investment of time with minimal financial payoff compared to your past projects. So, what was in it for you?

A: Well, I've felt for a long time that people with certain skill sets have an obligation to use them for the benefit of the greater community. A vibrant local art scene will be a magnet that attracts other artists. And if artists in general see how artists and galleries in Portland are prospering, then they'll think Portland will be a more interesting place to live. I think the photography (scene in Portland) is a good example. We are extremely fortunate to have the caliber of photography that we do in this city. The fact that internationally prominent photographers like Michael Kenna live here is a reflection of the quality and support of the craft. I knew that if the galleries were owners, if they were financially viable, then they'd also be more gutsy (artistically). And if you could multiply that effect, you could make a significant contribution to the overall vitality of the art scene. These were the things I was trying to support.

Q: The costs for the galleries and nonprofits was reduced extraordinarily by New Market Tax Credits, which is normally used to aid projects in blighted areas. While acknowledging that art is a great cause, how do you respond to those who question whether the use of these tax credits was appropriate for a project like this or the recent Armory project, which also benefited from the tax credits?

A: Technically, the point of the New Market Tax Credits is to take an area under economic stress and change that situation. And that's exactly what we did. If you had gone by the old Daisy Kingdom building when I did, and looked at the neighborhood, you would have felt that there was a lot of upside available. The area from a census, economic and demographic profile qualified for the tax credits.

Q: The DeSoto offers a few lessons in proactive strategy for galleries and nonprofits, don't you think?

A: I don't think nonprofits should be terribly or exclusively reliant on the largesse of foundations and trusts and corporate entities. They can generate their own income. And to understand that is helpful to them in terms of their own strategic thinking. So, it's important that some of the principles of for-profit enterprise be applied to nonprofits, and some of the compassion and mission-guided behaviors of nonprofits be utilized for for-profit enterprise. It provides more balance, a more compassionate way of being. In my case, it's a sympathy to art and artists who frequently do not benefit economically. Overall, this was an opportunity to do good, and in our case, make a little money.

Q: As a longtime patron and collector, you knew most or all of these dealers before you started the project. What did you learn about the participants and the art world that you didn't know before you started this?

A: Look, they are all marvelous human beings. Really fine people. I think they are very honorable. Was I surprised in one or two instances by a lack of financial sophistication? No. Or maybe a little bit. But on the other side, this (project) reinforced my sense that they are all honorable people, worthwhile human beings. Especially as they related to one another in meetings. There was nothing cutthroat or petty that I saw. That's nice and refreshing. I thought it was also heartening after the closing of the New Market Tax Credits that I got a thank-you note and a bottle of wine from someone that said: "Thank you for putting up with my occasional bouts of self-doubt." Some of these folks had real sleepless nights. If this project doesn't work, part of their lives is gone.

Q: You've said before that you desired only a certain number of galleries and a certain level of galleries. What did you mean by that?

A: Well, the building's only so big. We were also trying to have galleries that we felt were excellent and established ones - with a proven history. None of these galleries are brand new. They've all been around. Yes, Hartman's not from here but he's been a serious dealer for a long time (in the Bay Area).

Q: Did you ever seriously consider demolishing the building and developing it for other purposes?

A: No, not at all. Could we have? Sure. But I had a certain goal in mind. And certainly, once I made the decision I wasn't going to go back on it. Still, the block itself has certain qualities that suggest it could have housed a much bigger, taller building, like a condominium tower along the Park Blocks. That would have been attractive. But it wasn't something that I was interested in.

Q: We've seen the following scenario happen in the past in other then-emerging areas, namely the Pearl District and Alberta Street: A pioneering art presence comes in, which is then followed by a flood of gentrification that escalates rent and alters the entire complexion of the neighborhood.

A: Well, that's why I wanted to ensure the galleries would be owners. If you think about the history of the Pearl, it's grown and prospered. There was a genetic mutation and a kind of voluntary displacement as rents escalated - artists and others couldn't afford to work and live there. But what I was hoping to create at the DeSoto was an opportunity where galleries wouldn't be scattered all over town. It's a big benefit to have them centralized. What I'm hoping will happen now as Old Town develops is to have artist-owned studio spaces and gallery spaces and to have a vibrant, economically viable arts community. Because what I'd really like to see is artists making a living. I've long felt strongly about that, because if you aren't buying local art, the local artists aren't making money. And if no one is buying someone's art, what's the point of making it? That's why a lot of artists teach. That's terrific. But I'd like them to sell work. Having healthy galleries is one way of doing it.

Q: A young, struggling nonprofit, the Portland Art Center, is near the DeSoto. Did you ever talk to its director, Gavin Shettler, about participating in this venture somehow? Though I doubt it could have raised the money required - even \$10,000 is a lot of money for the center.

A: I discussed some ideas with Gavin. But no, it wasn't thought of for this project. You can't do everything in

one project. Still, this is an important precedent for an organization like the Portland Art Center. It has a generous, passionate landlord in Dave Gold. But at some point, it may want to own space.

Q: You studied moral philosophy and religion at Brown University. Then you went to law school at Lewis & Clark College. How did your education and professional career inform your philanthropic activities?

A: Whatever you want in life and whatever lessons you learn, your parents have an influence on them. At Brown, I got introduced to art. I don't think I had been to an art museum until I went to Brown. The philosophy courses there had a lot to do with my view of what one does if one's been fortunate - what it takes to create a just society.

Q: Your parents survived the Holocaust. How has that informed your patronage?

A: I think it just informed my point of view about life in general, fundamentally. You know, how lucky we are. And how arbitrary life is. I'd say that everyone's past affects their perception of reality. So, for me, yes, it's made a big difference. I've been involved in a lot of Jewish organizations as a philanthropist. But I don't think I can make a connection between the Holocaust and art. Maybe it has something to do with (the belief that) living well is the best revenge.

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