



NACF: Yale Union Building Capital Campaign

Native Arts and Cultures Foundation Undertakes Campaign to Transform the Yale Union Building into a Center for Native Arts and Cultures

**NATIVE
ARTS &
CULTURES
FOUNDATION**

In 2019, The Yale Union decided to rematriate the land and property at the Yale Union building, located in Southeast Portland, to the Native community by transferring ownership to the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation. After completing a feasibility study in 2019, NACF moved forward with plans to transform the space into a vibrant gathering place for Indigenous artists and local partnerships to present and exhibit, to practice culture and make art, and areas for cultural ceremony and celebration, as well as community workshops and seminars. In this article, NACF vice president and senior advisor Rupert Ayton discusses what this project means for the Native community, and how we can support the project campaign.

Native Arts and Cultures Foundation members were stunned at the opportunity when it began to unfold in late 2018 and early 2019. The Yale Union offered a free transfer of its 800 SE 10th Avenue building to NACF in a move to rematriate the land back to the Native community. The transfer has enormous meaning for Native people, and the free transfer meant the organization would not have to purchase a building valued at possibly close to \$5 million. Having a building that could serve as an art space immediately raised NACF's social value; the public and private response has been incredible. Yoko Ott, then executive director of Yale Union, was instrumental in the transfer; sadly, she passed in late 2019 before she could see the power of the gesture of which she first conceived.

While the opportunity to own a prime piece of real estate in Southeast Portland sounds like an obvious windfall, we were not naïve about it. The 40,000 square foot building is 112 years old with largely unreinforced masonry, and initially built as a steam laundry. It is also listed on the National Registry of Historic Places for its architecture and Portland history, including the women's labor movement, placing significant requirements on any



Yale Union Building; 800 SE 10th Avenue, Portland, Oregon

renovation and retrofit of the building. Additionally, when the building was originally put into charitable service, a covenant was added to the title limiting the building's use to being an art space. Tony Arnerich was one of the first people we sought counsel from, as was Mike True at Murdock Trust.





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In early 2019, we began comprehensive due diligence and planning for the building, learning every facet of it and assembling a team of local experts in historic buildings. Based on our ten years of programming working with Native artists in all disciplines, we possessed a good sense of what would make the building most valuable to our stakeholders. The list of planned amenities includes a 99-seat black-box theater with flexible seating and stage, together with full support infrastructure, a retail gallery space, 7,000 square feet of amazing exhibition space, lots of maker studio spaces, commercial arts spaces, community meeting rooms, a sound studio, and lots of socializing space.

In this time of COVID and lockdown, we all recognize how important it has been to us to have space to sit together and share story. The building plan has several indoor and outdoor areas for socializing, one being a small roof garden. But the most important space for our stakeholders is the creek that runs through the corner of the basement. Water is life. One of Portland's best kept secrets is that when the building was constructed, the east side of the Willamette up to what is now 10th was still marshland and a large slough. And before 1900, a creek ran west between what is now Taylor and Belmont, cutting across 10th and into the slough. The building was built on firm ground on the edge of the slough and original creek — and as a laundry, has a large sump in the basement that most likely filtered waste water into the water table. That creek still flows through the sump, and we plan to clean it up and create a gathering and meditative area around it. It is a very special place.

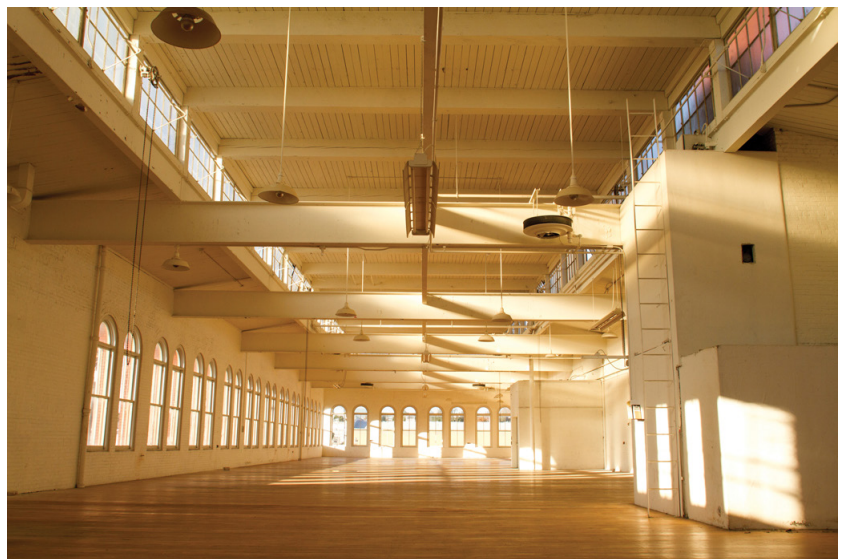
We are about to launch a comprehensive, national capital campaign to raise funds for our programming, the renovations and retrofit, and to create an operating endowment for the building. The campaign is expected to last three to five years. In round dollars, we are seeking \$35 million in total. We have been fortunate to have assembled a wonderful and mostly local planning committee. So far, the feedback we have received from funders and donors has been very positive. We have received over 20 letters of support from local and national arts, cultures, and humanities organizations and professionals. The staff of Senators Merkley and Wyden, plus Congressman Blumenauer, are supportive. So are our Oregon State Senator Kathleen Taylor and Representative Rob Nosse. Staff in Governor Brown's office, as well as those in the offices of Multnomah County Chair Kafouri and Portland Mayor Wheeler are supportive. And to seed the campaign, we have received a \$750,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a \$500,000 challenge grant from Sunderland Foundation, the philanthropy of the old Portland Cement Company.

In terms of the renovation and retrofit, there will be a year of planning approval followed by a year of actual construction. Portland architect Brian Emerick is leading the design work along with our project manager Jessica Engeman of Meritus, both having a lot of expertise with Portland's historic buildings. We will operate the building as-is until we close it for the year of construction, likely around 2025. The earliest we anticipate the renovated building coming back online is some time in 2026.

While access to the building is currently limited due to COVID-19, we are touring one or two people at a time. And when COVID restrictions are lifted, we will hold public Native art events in the exhibition space, such as art exhibitions, performances, art talks, and powwows. The building will also be available for community use as well as rentals for weddings, parties, photo shoots, and dinners, as it has been in the past.

The NACF Board approved acceptance of the building in December 2019 and the transfer has been approved by the Oregon Department of Justice with an irrevocable pledge agreement in place; the title will change hands on February 26, 2021, at which point NACF will hold the building in a single member Oregon LLC. Though we haven't planned any celebration (so that we don't jinx the project), we will have a private blessing if COVID allows. After that, we will see what makes sense, but definitely we hope to have a reception in the magnificent exhibition hall.

We are so thankful to Yoko Ott and to Flint Jamison and the board of Yale Union for making this possible. And to the more than 50 people who gave us their time and their wise counsel in helping us pull this all together so far.



NACF Main Gallery

