



by Justin Rothshank and Brad Stephenson

The Union Project “logo windows” (detail above) were designed by Keith Hershberger, a local artist and one of the organization’s initial founding members. Andrea Boykowycz, one of the first students in the stained glass classes at the Union Project, built these and seven other custom windows.

A nonprofit organization and a university team up to determine the most successful approach to setting up a cooperative ceramics studio

The Union Project is a Pittsburgh nonprofit organization that was formed in 2001. It is inspired by the hope for a neighborhood space in which to meet for fellowship, creativity, community, worship, learning and more. Its long-term mission: to restore and reuse the former Union Baptist Church in order to provide sustainable gathering and working space for artists, community builders and people of faith.

A principal goal of the Union Project is to become as financially self-sustaining as possible through innovative approaches to obstacles. A cooperative ceramics studio and a stained glass restoration company have been established, and a production facility is in the works. In addition, there is a community café, as well as office, studio and gathering-space rental in the facility.

The building is positioned at the literal intersection of some of Pittsburgh’s most racially and economically diverse urban neighborhoods. It had been neglected and effectively abandoned over the course of a decade. Using an “urban barn raising” approach, approximately 2500 volunteers have contributed some 25,000 hours of work toward all aspects of the project. We have completed initial capital fund raising and renovations with over \$3 million invested in the 15,000-square-foot building, and two-thirds of the facility is restored and in use.

In May 2005, we began working with eight students from the masters program at Carnegie Mellon University’s Heinz School of Public Policy. These students were enrolled in a systems synthesis class that teaches the skills necessary for structuring, managing and carrying out projects within an organization.

For sixteen weeks we conducted comprehensive research on cooperative models around the country. This research was meant not only to guide us in setting up a ceramics cooperative in Pittsburgh, but also to be broadly supportive of others interested in implementing cooperative business models in their home communities.

PHASE ONE: Definition

We researched specific cooperatives around the country, including art cooperatives, a food cooperative, a human service cooperative and a kibbutz. These were not-for-profit as well as for-profit entities. We also assembled an advisory panel with members from the fields of finance, education, marketing, facilities management, cooperative leadership, civic and government leadership and arts management. Lastly, we clearly defined our goals for the project.

PHASE TWO: Analysis

We conducted a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis of the Union Project, developed a list of potential competitors and allies and conducted an environmental scan of the Union Project’s community. This included an analysis of the demographics of the communities surrounding the Union Project.

Eleven local stakeholders, representing business, government, nonprofit and religious sectors, were interviewed. We asked questions about community awareness and impact to determine how the public views the Union Project and how they perceive the ability of the Union Project to make a positive difference in the region. Using

stakeholder feedback, we created a priority for our neighborhood. We discovered that stakeholders felt a major strength of the Union Project is our very clear mission and vision.

A focus group met on June 16, 2005, in order to achieve four major goals: determine what cooperative membership means to local artists, determine what benefits are expected, what tools and resources should be available, and what expectations there would be for the cooperative facility.

During the meeting, there was discussion about what exactly defines an artist's cooperative. We concluded that a cooperative is an organization where the members have ownership of the facilities and are jointly responsible for the care and maintenance of the facility. One of the benefits mentioned regarding this type of responsibility was having control of the direction of the group. Other benefits included sharing of space, equipment and exhibition opportunities.

The focus group suggested that Union Project will be important in Pittsburgh because it's a place where people can get started if they can't afford their own studio. Those kinds of communities are very valuable.

Artists observed that most local facilities demand that a person take a class to have access to the kiln or equipment. However, as their skills grow, they are less interested in paying money for a class that is most likely unneeded. The ability to come to a space, use your own tools and have a space in which to store your personal items is very appealing to an artist.

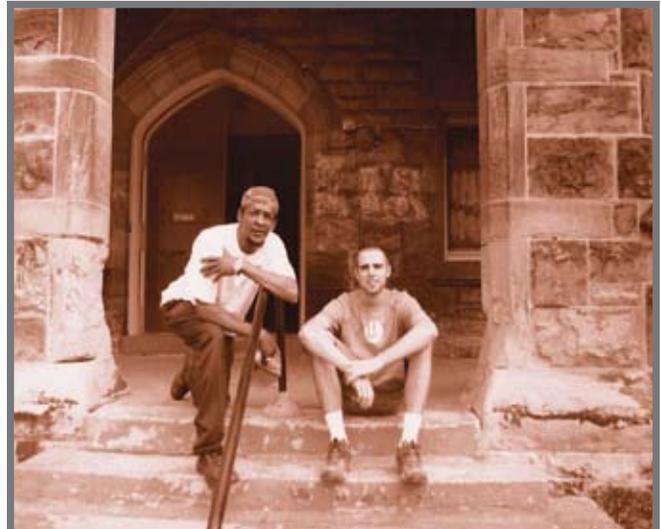
PHASE THREE: Research

We examined sixteen cooperatives across the United States. All of the cooperatives were art based, some of them specifically ceramics, and others of varying art types. We also spoke with members of two defunct cooperatives in order to learn about concepts that were unsuccessful.

A six-part questionnaire aided us in interviewing representatives from the sixteen cooperatives. The data regarding the topics of membership; staff and volunteers; tools and equipment; gallery and workspace; organizational structure and finances was then entered into a matrix for easy reference.

PHASE FOUR: Synthesis

We presented the information, focusing on recommendations that specifically assist the Union Project. However, we included multiple recommendation options in order to show our thought process, and to enable outside readers to apply our research to their own objectives in their own communities. In order to give a sense of the depth of our research, each category and its specific issues are summarized below. Much more in-depth attention to each category can be found in the "recommendations" section of the complete research document, which can be downloaded from www.unionproject.org.



Richard White (left) and Justin Rothshank. White was the first community member hired by the Union Project and assisted with building maintenance and volunteer coordination.



Since the Union Project's inception, approximately 2500 individual volunteers have worked nearly 25,000 hours. Volunteers have assisted with nearly every aspect of the organization's development, from landscaping, to demolishing plaster ceilings, to legal counsel and more.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership, and its associated "people" component, is perhaps the single most important aspect of a cooperative. It is people that matter most, and it is the attitudes of these people that can make the cooperative a success or failure. We asked questions about membership process, benefits, duties, costs, term limits and other issues about membership.



Co-op member Yasmeen Ariff-Sayed (standing) and Studio technician/Americorps volunteer Saaeda Brown (at wheel) hard at work in the ceramics studio. “We have more interest in our clay program than we can keep up with,” Rothshank says. “Like any start up organization, we have had to carefully budget and acquire equipment in creative ways. We continue to work on finding better ways to maintain the studio, safely store materials and equipment, and set up the studio to be conducive to creating.”

While we did come up with specific answers to these questions, it is clear that many of these answers are very site/organization specific. The amount of space, cost and structure of the organization greatly influences the answers to these questions.

TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT

Accessibility to tools and equipment is a primary reason for cooperative existence. We determined that these resources could also make or break a cooperative space. We especially focused on types of tools, kilns, other equipment, and who will be responsible for their maintenance and repair.

It is exceedingly important to make accountability and responsibility for maintenance, availability, and quality of tools and equipment very clear. Frustration in maintenance can lead to the downfall of a cooperative. The clearer the communication regarding responsibility, the better off the cooperative will be.

GALLERY SPACE

While many cooperatives operate gallery/display areas, we discovered that this is not an essential component of a cooperative’s success. We considered how a gallery could be run, what kind of work could be displayed and who could staff the space. In the short time since we’ve

been open, we have learned that the success of a retail area can be greatly influenced by other aspects of the organization. One exhibiting artist observed that, “this other aspect—being a community-based organization that’s not *just* an artists’ organization—was really, really appealing, and actually is really exciting to me.”

We concluded that if early precedents are set for the gallery space, so that all cooperative members are clear on the policies, then a gallery area could be a very positive component to a cooperative and could also help attract new membership.

WORKSPACE

In considering the workspace at Union Project, we were greatly influenced by the overall organizational mission. It is our mission of “creating community...” that made it clear that workspaces should be public and shared. However, we also concluded that individual artists need their own space for storage, tools, etc. As one focus group member stated, “I tried working with other people, and it didn’t work out as I would have liked...one person couldn’t devote enough time to get everything organized. If people don’t work together, it falls apart.” In this vein, a somewhat hybrid approach to sharing space is most likely the best method when setting up a cooperative. We also have learned, since doing the research and actually physically

setting up the space, that layout and design can greatly impact the productivity of a workspace. We have not been afraid to rearrange the studio, build new walls or ware carts, and experiment with the best possible layout. We know that this may be an ongoing issue as we continue to gain new membership.

STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

Staffing is the single most expensive component of an organization, and the model that works best saves the cooperative money while effectively completing tasks. There are many ways to “staff” a clay studio, or any business, that don’t involve increasing payroll, and this can be a successful solution to staffing. It was our conclusion that as a startup organization it is important to build investment, membership responsibility and keep costs down by running the cooperative strictly through volunteer and membership-driven staffing. Since our start up, we have been able to successfully recruit Americorps volunteers with significant clay experience and significant interest in learning about running a studio. These volunteers continue to build and fire kilns, reclaim clay, perform glaze experiments and work on form development for our future production studio.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The structure of a cooperative should be considered from the very beginning. Should the ceramics cooperative be part of the Union Project, or should it have its own business and administrative entity? This question is important for any group considering a cooperative approach. We ultimately decided that the co-op should be part of the Union Project. This proved to be the easiest method, but also the method that allowed the greatest potential for growth for both the Union Project and the cooperative.

FINANCES

Cooperative organizations are driven by idealism that the members can gain advantages by working together in a democratic fashion to further their trade. Cooperatives often have a difficult time demanding better results from under-performing members, and it is difficult for them to end or change unprofitable programming that is popular with their donor bases. But the cooperatives still must make these tough decisions in order to survive.

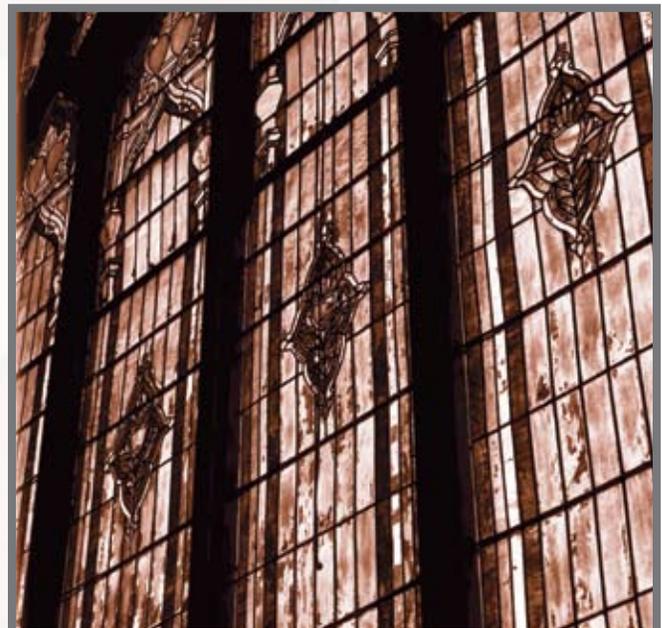
There is evidence that this business model can work. Of the fourteen existing cooperatives we surveyed, the average number of years in existence was 25.9, indicating that a cooperative can be sustainable if it is financially responsible. We took great care in addressing the financial issues surrounding a cooperative start up. Our benchmarking study can provide some guidance about the possible size of the annual budget of a cooperative. During our research we found budgets ranging in size from \$20,000 to \$1 million.

We created a dollars-per-member matrix that shows a wide range of possibilities, from \$216 to \$5000 spent per member/per year,

and it does not take into account the vast differences in the business models under which each runs. Through our research, we came to an average budget-per-member amount of \$2568/year or \$214 per month. While it is important to take into account the special circumstances surrounding individual situations, we have found it incredibly helpful to have national benchmarking standards with which to set our annual budgets. These numbers can be helpful not only in deciding how to determine pricing, but also to determine how a business can grow.

We have capitalized on this research by using it as our guide. This summer we completed construction of a natural gas downdraft kiln, built in partnership with another local university, Carlow University. We continue to grow our ceramics program, and although we still haven’t “officially” opened our co-op, we already have a consistent group of potters that call the Union Project home. We have been able to recruit Americorps volunteers to assist us in staffing, teaching and studio maintenance. Although we are still very new to the clay scene in Pittsburgh, we’ve been able to start off on the right foot by carefully budgeting and striving to achieve financial sustainability in our clay programs.

Students from Carnegie Mellon’s Institute for the Management of Creative Enterprises (www.artsnet.org) conducted the research for this article in conjunction with Union Project. For more information or to view the complete research document visit www.unionproject.org or www.rothshank.com.



Glass Action, a stained glass restoration business that will employ apprentices from the community, grew out of the Union Project’s stained glass classes. Nearly 200 students have participated in the classes and helped restore approximately 100 windows in the building, saving the organization about \$1 million in restoration costs.