

## Eugene Science Center: A Brief History

*Updated November 2022*

Eugene Science Center was founded in 1961 as the Southwest Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (SWOMSI), a branch of the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) located in Portland, OR. SWOMSI opened in Eugene in 1965 under the leadership of Del Long and funding from a 3-year grant. It received only brief support from its parent organization and was soon left operating as a small independent museum with a Board of Directors composed primarily of local educators. SWOMSI's first offices were located at 157 E. Broadway, and its first exhibit and store space was at 510 Oak Street. In 1967, SWOMSI purchased the old Oregon Electric Railway Station, located at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Willamette Street, for \$150.00. During its early years in the Oregon Electric Railway Station, SWOMSI offered exhibits and classes, and ran planetarium shows in the Spitz Planetarium with equipment formerly operated by OMSI.



*SWOMSI in downtown Eugene, OR in the old Oregon Electric Railway Station located on the corner of Willamette St and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.*

By 1970, finding the railroad station inadequate and realizing that the Spitz Planetarium was nearing the end of its useful life, SWOMSI's Board of Directors approached the Lane County Commissioners to ask for space in the newly created Alton Baker Park. In 1975, the Cooperative Museum Commission (later called the Oregon Museum Park Commission), coordinated by Lane County and led by UO Physics Professor Russell Donnelly, was formed for the purpose of funding and building a museum complex consisting of a new State Museum of Natural History, which would incorporate the existing University of Oregon Museum of Natural History, a new Lane County Historical Museum, a new planetarium, and a science center (SWOMSI). One important

objective in this process was to avoid potential duplication by building a single new planetarium to serve students from the University of Oregon, Lane Community College, and the Lane Education Service District.

Funding for the museum complex was obtained under the Federal Economic Development Administration and each of the consortium members (Lane Community College, Lane Education Service District, University of Oregon, and SWOMSI) contributed substantially to the project, financially and through in-kind services. At that time, the Oregon Electric Railroad Station was sold and \$50,000 was put into the construction of the present building in Alton Baker Park. SWOMSI temporarily moved in May of 1977 to 480 Shelly Street in Springfield, OR while its new building in Alton Baker Park was being constructed.

During 1976, initial plans for the Oregon Museum Park were created, site preparation was accomplished, and, in 1978-79, the first building, containing the science center and the new planetarium, was constructed. The Lane County museum complex, however, was not to be. The combination of a serious recession, and the efforts of some faculty to retain the UO Museum of Natural History as a campus facility, eventually led to the disbanding of the Oregon Museum Park Commission. Only the science museum and planetarium were built on the site. It was also during this time that the science museum became a private non-profit science center called the Willamette Science and Technology Center (WISTEC).



1976 Master Site Plan of the proposed museum complex from the Cooperative Museum Commission. The blue rectangle denotes the location of the SWOMSI building and Lane ESD Planetarium that were constructed.

WISTEC opened at its present location in February 1980 and hired Jeff Gottfried as its first Executive Director. In 1982, Jeff Gottfried resigned as director and was replaced by Alice Carnes, the former director of the UO Museum of Natural History. It was during this time that WISTEC opened the planetarium, which was operated by a consortium of agencies including the Lane Education Service District, University of Oregon, and Lane Community College. Bill Suggs, in a shared position with the University of Oregon, was the first planetarium director and remained in that position until 1987. During this time, the planetarium was functionally and financially separate from WISTEC. The planetarium eventually became the sole responsibility of the Lane Education Service District and was closed in December 2002 after a failed effort to gain public support through a local election for relocation to the Lane County Fairgrounds.



Proposed site plan for relocating the planetarium to the Lane County Fairgrounds, 2001.



Front entrance to the Willamette Science and Technology Center (WISTEC), 2001.

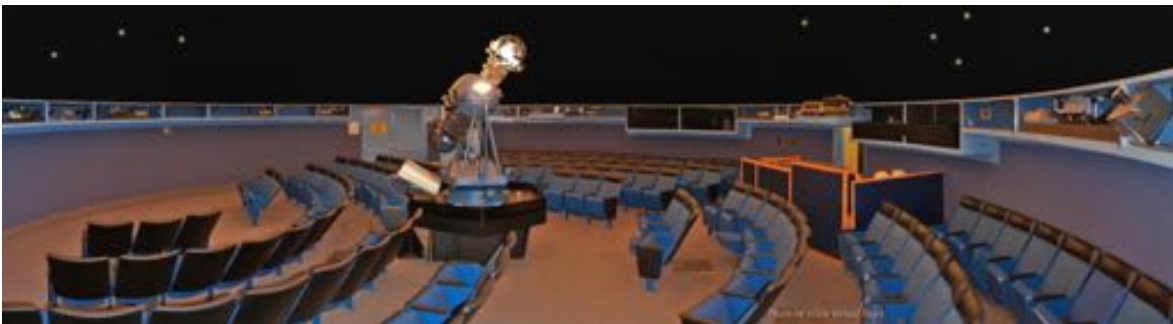
In January 2002, WISTEC changed its name to The Science Factory. With the transfer of the planetarium to Science Factory ownership in 2003, and with the adoption of a local group attempting to create a children's museum called *The Land of Awe*, it became The Science Factory Children's Museum and Planetarium, but was generally still referred to as The Science Factory.



Science Factory with its brightly painted stripes, 2004.

Education programs at The Science Factory took a big step forward in 2006 with the remodel and upgrade of its main instructional space, a classroom adjacent to the exhibit hall. This project, guided by former Executive Director, Joyce Berman, was a true community effort through which local businesses, organizations, and individuals combined efforts and resources to completely remodel its primary educational space. This project represented the first of a planned series of remodels and upgrades to The Science Factory's education and exhibit capacity.

A second renovation project, the conversion of the existing planetarium into a multipurpose educational theater was accomplished in January 2010. This upgraded planetarium, then renamed the Exploration Dome, featured a Konica Minolta single-lens digital projection system capable of projecting full-dome, 360°, video programs as well as more traditional planetarium presentations. This remodel and upgrade also involved the installation of a digital surround sound system, new lighting, and remodel of the adjacent office, storage, and workspace. Future renovation and development projects were also planned to replace an aging HVAC system, remodel and expand the exhibit hall, and develop an outdoor science park, but funding for these endeavors fell through at the time.



The planetarium prior to its 2010 renovation with its mechanical star projector, numerous slide projectors, and displays.

WISTEC/Science Factory exhibited a large number of traveling exhibitions, beginning with *Yesterday's Tomorrows* and *Magna Carta* in the early 1980's, extending through showings of robotic dinosaurs and sea mammals, and the Exploratorium's *Finding Your Way* (a premiere for that exhibit) in the late 1980's and early 1990's, to *Tech City*, *Sportsology*, and *Take Flight*. In 1986, WISTEC, with funding from the National Science Foundation, created its own traveling exhibition, *Kaleidoscopes: Reflections of Art and Science*.

While The Science Factory may have been best known for the many outstanding traveling exhibits it hosted, its main purpose was always to provide an engaging and supportive environment in

which children and families can come to understand and appreciate the role of science and technology in their daily lives. Increasing science and technological literacy, especially for children but also for adults, was its primary objective. This purpose has been reflected through strong summer camp and field trip programs, and from such former specialized programs as CyberSisters, a nationally recognized program designed to provide young girls with adult female mentors who encouraged the girls to explore careers in math, science, and technology, and the Lane Science Cadre, an in-service program for elementary teachers in Lane County, to our current school outreach programs, and a special day each month for young scientists and their parents called *Tot Discovery Days*. Special learning environments were created within the exhibit space including a remodeled computer education laboratory (1998) and the very popular Tot Spot (2001).

In March 2010, Carolyn Rebbert was hired as Executive Director. Under her leadership, The Science Factory expanded its educational programming to include the local Ham Radio Club, Girls STEM Workshops, and an annual Maker Faire. Yearly fundraiser events began, which helped raise funds to renovate its conference room (later remodeled into a Community Room in fall 2017). In 2015, The Science Factory was recognized as a sustainable business and awarded the ReThink Certification from BRING Recycling. Its endowment was created in 2015 thanks to a major gift from the disbanded Eugene Mineral Club. In February 2016, a new fundraising-focused position was created thanks to two years of funding by an anonymous donor.

In August 2016, Tim W. Scott was hired as Executive Director bringing over 20 years of science museum and aquarium experience. In September 2016, The Science Factory's mission, vision, and values were modified slightly to focus more heavily on STEM education, empowerment, and community engagement. During this time, "Children's Museum and Exploration Dome" was dropped from its name as the organization began to analyze its brand and purpose. January 2017 marked the beginning of its participation in the *Museums for All* access program, and the launch of its Corporate Membership Program. In late Spring 2017, The Science Factory launched its *Foundation for the Future* initiative to strengthen, revitalize, and expand its assets and educational offerings. The transformation of its back storage area/loading dock into an exhibit fabrication workshop also began in 2017 thanks to grant funding. It was during this time that the organization changed its exhibition philosophy from renting traveling exhibitions to creating its own with help from the community. The new position of Guest Relations & Operations Director was created in November 2017, which allowed the new Administrative Director position to focus more

strategically on finance and HR. In January 2018, The Science Factory launched its new brand along with its new name, Eugene Science Center, in an effort to better communicate its newly refocused purpose, and accomplish its bold ambitions of becoming a unique, world-class science center for its community. 2018 also saw the opening of the science center's new Discovery Room, and the installation of a state-of-the-art, high-resolution planetarium projection system, all of which led to record breaking attendance of over 41,000 visits in 2019.



The COVID-19 pandemic forced the Science Center to closed its doors as a museum mid-March of 2020. During the Spring, the community came together to construct the new Outdoor Ecology Lab, a solar-panel covered 1,000 square foot outdoor pavilion located on the bank of its North Pond. This project marked the organization's first physical expansion since opening in the park in 1980. It then operated as an Emergency Childcare Facility and private tutoring space in partnership with the Eugene/Springfield NAACP until reopening as a science center in September, 2021.



*Eugene Science Center's Outdoor Ecology Lab.*



*TO BE CONTINUED...*