

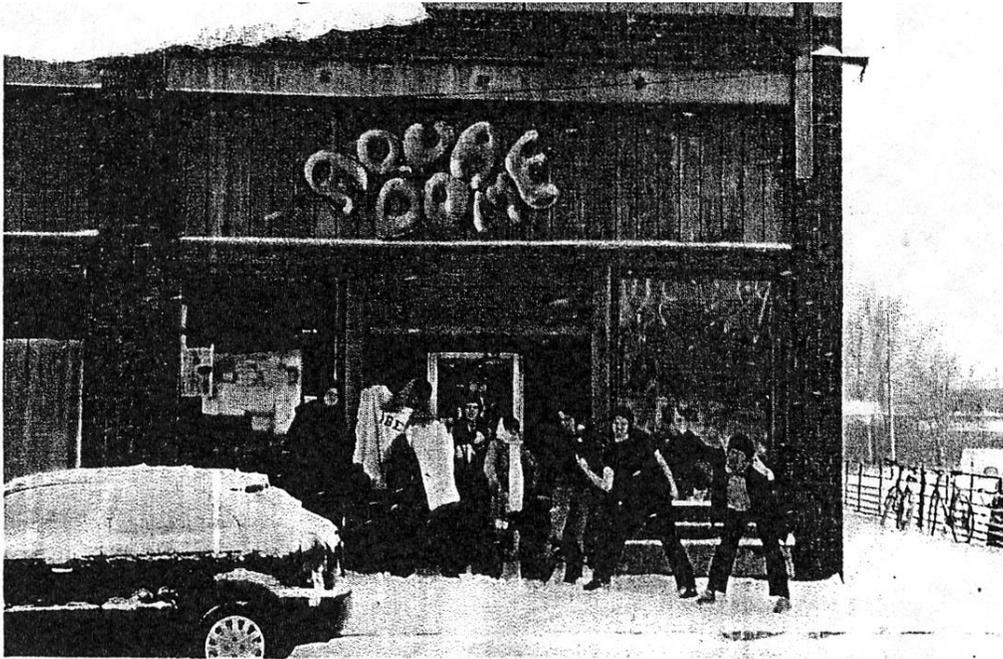
A Space for People Who Don't Have Space:
An Oral History of the Aquadome

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ENG 365: Folklore

Original text from December 3, 2012.

Revised in December 2013.



The Aquadome, from *The Aquadome: A love story*, 2004.

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Resting behind Kirksville's Downtown Cinema 8 is an old storefront. Throughout its history, the building at 121 N. Main Street has been among other things a buggy store, a church, a pool hall, vacant, and most recently a do-it-yourself (DIY) music venue and community center named the Aquadome. Affectionately known to some as "the dome," the venue has hosted numerous music and art projects and has primarily been overseen by dedicated people from Truman State University (TSU) and the greater Kirksville community. Over the years, there have been two distinct Aquadome generations: one that is currently active and the founding generation, which has been deeply lacking in documented historical detail. With that in mind, I have recorded an oral history about this venue in order to salvage these details before they fall out of reach, leaving only a few newspaper articles as the record of a creative outlet for Kirksville, Missouri.

This project is divided into several sections, the first of which focuses on currently available historic documentation regarding the Aquadome. This is summarized in order to establish basic information about the venue. From there, the concentration will shift to the oral history I have recorded, comparing the first and second generations of the Aquadome. These comparisons will be divided into History, Organization, and Philosophy.

It is important here that I mention my place in this history. When I first came to TSU as a transfer student in the fall semester of 2011, I discovered the Aquadome

on a bike ride through town. Since then, I have been volunteering at events and am currently a member of its executive board. Early in my time as a volunteer, I heard several stories about the “old Aquadome,” a kind of mythical-sounding place once located in the same building, populated by the sort of artistic and free-spirited people that I could imagine existing, but not actually envision myself meeting in real life. After some research, it became clear that this earlier incarnation of the Aquadome had not been well-documented. However, artifacts seemed to always be popping up—a handbill, a flyer, old books, abandoned artwork—and I stayed interested. I am pleased to be as much a participant in this history as I am a recorder, but this has undoubtedly played out in the ways I conducted research and interviews, and especially in my interpretation of information. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to analyze something in which I am so involved without my opinions and experiences influencing the results. With that acknowledged, I have made my best attempts to remain as unbiased as possible in the construction of this project.

To begin, available information about the Aquadome comes predominantly from *The Index*, TSU’s student-operated newspaper. There are four articles in particular that address pertinent historical information—two from each generation—some of which not only contradict what I learned in interviews, but occasionally each other. In “Artists’ haven in financial peril,” the Aquadome is said to have originally opened in May of 2000, but “Student plans to re-open venue” suggests 2001. Inconsistent information like this merits cautious behavior when citing these articles. However, because historical documentation is limited, I will lay out what information these articles provide for a basic backstory about the venue.

The Aquadome's history according to *The Index* reads that the business was started sometime between May of 2000 and 2001. It was a non-profit business run by a committee made up of TSU students, graduates, and community members, at least as of March 2003 (Dowell). Although a "committee," by definition, often consists of appointed members, another article states the structure was "set up as a collective, anyone could be involved in the decision-making process" which "operated by consensus." Nicole Rainey is quoted saying the Aquadome had "maybe an average of 10 to 15 people who run it" (Ponche).

In reference to the types of events held at the Aquadome, as well as the amenities of the building, the articles mention a variety of concerts (commonly referred to as "shows"), a carnival, bookbinding workshops, karate lessons, break dancing parties, weekly vegan dinners, a vegan potluck on Sundays, a zine library, studio art space, a collection of art supplies, a darkroom, and sound equipment.

As early as March 6, 2003, there were serious financial issues that left volunteers scrambling to raise money for the \$400 rent. Although loans were occasionally made to support the venue, committee members often aided rental fee payments with their own money. Funds were also generated from renting the top floor to artists for studio space and musicians for practice space. However, in January of 2004, the Aquadome decided to close its doors, citing financial issues, sparse events, and a decline in volunteers as the causes.

Few comments throughout these articles are made with regard to the philosophy of the Aquadome. Nicole Rainey speaks of the venue as being both drug- and alcohol-free, specifically mentioning the presence of high school students and

the desire to be inclusive toward them at the venue. She is also quoted saying, “what the community wants, the Aquadome is,” suggesting the venue was designed to be flexible, although there is no elaboration on this in the article.

The second generation of the Aquadome, which is significantly more documented outside of *Index* articles, largely because of the Internet and social media, began in the summer of 2011, backed, at first, solely by Brie Vuagniaux, a TSU student. Inspired by what she knew of the first Aquadome, she began making improvements to the building with her own money that summer and started holding events during the fall semester, such as “The Down and Dirty Punk Folk Show” on Friday, August 26, featured in the *Index’s* “Unexpected harmonies” article.

This article does fortunately make reference to some of the philosophy behind the present-day Aquadome. Vuagniaux is said to have hoped for a mixed audience with people merging from Kirksville, Moberly Area Community College, in addition to TSU students.

This is what it was about originally. We are trying to bridge the talent between the local community and the college. There are so many good things here. We want everyone to get to experience them. We’re trying to develop a community in Kirksville.

Beyond this, there is not much expansion on the ideology or history of the Aquadome.

After sorting through the basic information these articles provided, I began conducting interviews. Questions were written from my notes on the information above as well as from my own experiences at the Aquadome. Of the four interviews I conducted, a majority of the information that appears in this study comes from my combined interview with Julia Davis, Nicky Rainey (mentioned above as Nicole), and

Nick Kuntz on October 6, 2012. As volunteers and organizers from the first generation of the Aquadome, they offered the most undocumented information by a wide margin. I had both planned and actually attempted to contact other members of the venue, but I either received no response or was limited in my search due to time constraints. Because I do not have information from other volunteers, it is important to note that Julia, Nicky, and Nick “all kind of had the same experience” at the Aquadome and were “removed” from some of the “tensions and things that came up.” Keeping this in mind, it is possible that I may have collected a one-sided history, a risk that is likely with any oral history project. What I value is that I salvaged any history at all, securing it from falling out of access.

Because some quotations pulled from the interview with Julia, Nicky, and Nick are conversational, linked comments have been indicated with an arrow (→) at their end. Any conversational comments will feature this mark.

In addition to the Julia-Nicky-Nick interview, I also conducted interviews with Brie Vuagniaux on October 7, 2012 and Hannah Copeland, the current president of the Aquadome, on October 21, 2012. Finally, on October 31, 2012, I interviewed Jim Jereb, an art professor at TSU who has taught Aquadome volunteers and attended Aquadome events during both generations. He provided interesting information about public opinion of the venue, but very little of his interview serves the purposes of this project.

Beginning with a prehistory of the Aquadome, Julia, Nicky, and Nick laid out the events and people that led up to the formation of the venue.

Nicky: Morgan [Peckosh] grew up in Kirksville and had been hosting shows in Kirksville probably since he was in high school... and had this whole

community of people. I mean... there was a punk scene in Macon in the 90s and there's a documentary about it... There was a lot of stuff going on here... And so when Morgan was in—I guess he went to Truman... he started or was part of this on-campus organization called Campus Music Collective where they would get money from... [the TSU Student Activities Board] SAB to host bands on campus... →

Julia: They had a lot of shows for a while—before the Aquadome opened up—in Kirk Memorial, in the old gym in there... They had a lot of shows in there and I guess they wanted their own space.

The three questioned the date of the Aquadome's founding, at first saying 2000, but then allowing that it might have been earlier, settling on sometime within the 1999-2000 school year. They listed the founders of the venue as Morgan Peckosh, Ben Garrett, Amanda Bunyard, Amelia [Self?], and Jesse Pasley. Julia, Nicky, and Nick came to the venue early in their college careers, just after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center.

Nicky: It was a wild time... in American History... [9/11] was very shocking... And the US immediately went to war in Afghanistan, which, for people of a certain political mindset, was very deeply disturbing. And also the homeland security thing started escalating and that was very troubling. And so I think all of that fed into our drive to keep the Aquadome open... And the music reflected that feeling too, I think—the punk music at that time.

The music Nicky mentions, although not always punk, was a major part of what the Aquadome did. Nick reminisced of bands from Plan-It-X, an influential DIY folk and punk record label, playing at the Aquadome, specifically mentioning This Bike is a Pipe Bomb and Soophie Nun Squad. Julia brought up metal band Fat Day more than once as a memorable music experience.

Julia: They were all older—they were professors. They were like physics professors... that went on tour in the summers, I guess... It was like a tiny opera, it was like a tiny metal opera. (Laughs) They had a whole story. They had blowup animals that they would throw out into the audience... The one

[show] that I went to, it was about a Viking child that only had one horn on his helmet. And so they would throw out a sea creature blowup animal that was part of the story and the audience would interact with it. And they had these helmets that they had put buttons on and attached to musical instruments and so they could play their instruments by pushing the buttons on their helmets that also had horns that went along with the story.

Reflecting on the attendance at shows and the technological changes that became mainstream just as the first generation of the Aquadome came to a close, the three give some insight into the typical audience at events:

Nicky: ...Indie rock really changed when the Internet became more accessible. Now a lot more people are into indie rock and punk rock, because a lot more people have a more access to more music... Then, if you wanted to know about hardcore punk bands... people would trade mix tapes... So the shows, I would say the average attendance to the shows would be like 20 people. →

Nick: No, I think the average is probably lower than that... We had shows multiple times a week often, which would hurt. So then people didn't want to turn out to shows all the time... Sometimes there'd be a ton of people and other times there would be stretches where... there would be the same 10 people there. →

Julia: A lot of the time... I would feel obligated to go to a show, just so the band would have an audience. I'm not really into straightedge hardcore, but I've been to a lot of straightedge hardcore shows. (Laughs) I always felt like, oh, I learned how to dance to everything. Cause you just made it fun.

Non-music events, which are covered in the articles from *The Index*, are expanded upon in the interview. There were figure drawing classes, a haunted house, screen-printing teach-ins, political organizing, and film screenings—many of which were art films created by their friends or friends of friends, but they also screened feature films on occasion, such as 1927's *Metropolis*. The Tom Thumb Art Gallery, a TSU-student-founded traveling art show, was held at the Aquadome multiple times. The space was also rented out for events, such as a sorority dance,

and used by groups such as Anti-Racist Action and the Lonely Minds Club as a meeting place. As Nick put it, “the Aquadome was about having space for people who don’t have space.”

After roughly a four-year run, the Aquadome decided to close its doors in 2004, but not without celebration.

Nicky: By the end, when we closed it down, the last couple of months were really hard for us and we were really sad, but we just couldn’t do it any more, we had no money... So I made that zine [*The Aquadome: A love story.*] and me and a few other people threw a pitiful goodbye potluck and nobody came. And it was just really sad. And Morgan Peckosh... was living in Columbia and heard that it was closing and from Columbia organized a huge event for its going away. And we held it in the whole upstairs and they turned the whole upstairs into a MX bike racing track and built jumps and stuff... and brought in punk bands... And it was really well attended. And so there [were] punk bands playing and people riding MX bikes around in circles and people throwing flour everywhere and people getting drunk and dancing. So it was really beautiful and cathartic... It was just a lovely way to end... I was just so grateful for that... It was a very big part of our lives.

After the Aquadome’s final event, the building was emptied, the keys were returned to the landlord, and 121 N. Main Street was left to become whatever business came next. After a few years passed, the Aquadome’s history resumed in summer of 2011 when Brie Vuagniaux came to the storefront with the intention of reopening the venue at what she saw as the perfect time.

Brie: I had just gotten out of my English degree [at TSU] and I wanted to go into nursing. And I had at least a year and half of prerequisites for nursing... And I had this great amount of time where I didn’t just want to work, I wanted to be really busy and I wanted to be doing somethin’ fun in town. And so I’d heard about this place called the Aquadome that used to exist ten years ago in this abandoned shitty building and, um, I took a stroll down here to follow the rumors and see what this building looked like because I thought starting a venue might be a good way to spend my time and I was all inspired by those people that used to be a part of it because they were the wildest, craziest people in town. I mean, these are the people that every one that you meet, you’re like, “I want to know them really well.”

She had also participated in Tom Thumb Art Gallery XV during April 2011, which was held in the then-former Aquadome, and was inspired by her experience.

Brie: I was like, I want to keep this place open all the time. I feel like Kirksville artsy kids could really use this... You only have a few years in your life and its very good to do this during college, it's like the prime time to really go off the grid and like live in an abandoned warehouse and make art all the time and be wild and anarchist and, you know, figure out what matters to you. Because once you have to start working and stuff, it's a lot harder to juggle that side of yourself with the rest of your responsibilities. So it's good to figure it out while you can and exploit it and then not look back. You know what I mean? (Laughs.)

Shortly after Brie had the new version of the Aquadome up and running, an executive board and volunteer roster were established. One of the earliest major issues dealt with at the new Aquadome was finding an identity for the business. When Brie first reopened the Aquadome, she envisioned "a very inclusive community center" that would host one or two small shows each week, provide a place for musicians to stay, and potentially have potlucks. Before she opened the space, however, a friend suggested a variation on that plan.

Brie: I met Jillian [Burke] right before I opened it and she wanted to use the Aquadome as a Food Not Bombs place, so she could have that political potluck every couple weeks... We sort of thought of it as like a community center... slash music venue for travelling bands. But then it was more like a music venue for bigger shows and a rental space is how we ended up using it.

Brie had also hoped for the venue to be "straightedge," meaning the space would have been drug and alcohol free like the first Aquadome.

Brie: ...I thought that would be really neat. If people could go party elsewhere but then come here for just pure art... Then we met with reality remember? We were like... "Okay, what do the people want?"

During a short period when this policy was enforced, when flyers often read “Substance Free,” I personally recall attendance dropping drastically. Ironically, I never felt like these rules were enforced strictly, as I often saw at least a couple people drinking by the end of each night’s performance, potentially because they simply didn’t know about the rule.

The unclear identity, facilitated by different visions people had for the space, led to disorder and public confusion about what purpose the Aquadome served. One of the board members at the time was Hannah Copeland, a then recent friend of Brie’s who later became secretary and is currently serving as president. Reflecting back on this identity struggle, Hannah commented:

Hannah: So, from early in September 2011 to maybe October, there was a lot of... turmoil about defining what the Aquadome was—if it was a community center or a music venue... We decided... music brings people together—that’s a global phenomenon and the Aquadome really harnesses that. And the community aspect of it can be incorporated into the music... At this point, we went from defining and fighting over what the space was and... I feel like we just kind of realized that there really wasn’t a point in fighting (laughs) and it really is just a music venue with art and people like it and it brings people together, so that’s community.

After settling this identity issue, the members of the Aquadome began hosting events more regularly, scheduling more rentals, and continued to improve the project. In the summer of 2012, they held an event called Work Week, a full week of scheduled cleaning, maintenance, and remodeling that generated good results.

Hannah: I want so badly for people to feel comfortable in the space and we cleaned a lot. And now it looks great! That was a goal [of ours] and it came true.

The executive board is now in the process of better defining what volunteers and board members do at the Aquadome. The hope is that this will make the venue easier to pass down to new volunteers as older members move on. Finally, bringing this history to the present, a goal Hannah mentioned during our interview was to raise enough money to purchase a PA. In the recent past, most amplified events at the Aquadome used borrowed or rented sound systems. Since our interview, enough money was generated through donations and fundraising events and the PA was purchased, making the Aquadome more equipped than any other time in its second generation.

With the historical events of the venue now set out, I think the specifics of Aquadome's organizational structure should be mentioned, as it is one of the more outstanding differences between each generation. Here, Julia, Nicky, and Nick discuss the consensus-based structure of the first generation.

Nick: ...It was consensus-run, so there wasn't a board or anything. And whoever would contribute to the meetings was just whoever showed up and anyone could show up. But mainly it was the same set of people. →

Nicky: So, consensus-based decision-making is like a Quaker thing but it's also an anarchist thing... It's a decision-making process where you don't vote, where you have to discuss something until everyone agrees. →

Nick: Or you just decide you're okay with not agreeing. →

Nicky: So it's hard. →

Julia: And it can take forever. →

Nicky: And it did.

Contrasting this collective setup, the new Aquadome's organization and meetings are relatively structured, although there has been noteworthy variation in

that structure throughout this generation's evolution. From the onset of the second generation, there was a board of executives used for decision-making. Earlier on however, it was very easy to be a member of the board. For example, I was invited to be on the board the first time I expressed interest in volunteering which was also the first time I had ever been to the Aquadome. Such a loose board arrangement meant that certain people did more than others and had more authority than others in a way that was essentially undefined. As time passed, however, there was an effort to make decisions more efficiently, resulting in a more refined organizational structure. Hannah mentioned that, earlier on, meetings could last a couple of hours, but are now often under an hour.

The system currently in place has five elected positions: president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and public relations. It is important to note that these positions are organizational and do not reflect a member's authority. Meetings are held once a week, with half an hour for board members to discuss specific financial issues or topics deemed too technical or boring for general volunteers. After those 30 minutes pass, the meeting opens up to the public.

In addition to the Aquadome's structure, a major component of its history has been its philosophical foundations—ideas that shaped what took place in each generation.

Nicky: Part of the punk ethos at the time was not just about the music, but it was also about activism and social justice... Also, there were a lot of artists that were sort of hanging around. So having a space was a way to facilitate artists having studio space, and also having a space where people could organize political stuff, and then a way for... people who were vegan and vegetarian who felt disenfranchised...

This line of thought ties into the comments about the September 11 attacks made earlier. With social unease on the mind of the volunteers, the old Aquadome seems to have been a sort of hub for the artistic and the political, with an emphasis on visual art and music.

The new Aquadome has made a shift away from this social issue-based motivation, but not entirely. As already stated, Brie was very influenced by what she knew about the first generation and seems to have taken this with her as she developed the venue. With these foundations and the mindset that the Aquadome should primarily be a community music venue, the current Aquadome operates in a way that is still very much DIY, but which is more like a non-profit business than a politically charged collective. When I mentioned the lack of political activity currently at the Aquadome, Nicky said, "It seems like it's a different kind of project now... Something else... that more fits the needs of what your generation is interested in."

At the beginning of my interview with Julia, Nicky, and Nick, I was given several copies of the zine Nicky made upon the Aquadome's initial closing. *The Aquadome: A love story*. is very much what its title suggests, with all the highs and lows that come packaged with that kind of relationship, presented through short entries from Aquadome volunteers. The zine doesn't cover any significant historical events that aren't mentioned elsewhere, but it provides a kind of snapshot of the feelings these volunteers and this group of friends felt. One entry in particular, written by co-founder Ben Garrett, touches on the imperfections that Julia, Nicky, and Nick managed to be uninvolved with, but arrives at the same appreciation the

three express. He writes, "...for all of its faults, or maybe even in part because of them, The Aquadome was the last place I could ever truly say that I belonged in and felt needed and loved and appreciated in, just for being me" (pg 2).

Appendix: December 2013

It's worth mentioning that since the initial completion of this project, an additional source of information about the Aquadome's first run has been made known. Quite a few articles were published in *The Monitor*, Truman's alternative newspaper, regarding the Aquadome between 2000 and 2003. These are available online at <http://trumanmonitor.wordpress.com/archives/>.

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