

# Boise Art Glass

## A Study of Incremental Growth in an Era of Contraction

by Colleen Bryan

Filip Vogelpohl, owner of Boise Art Glass in Idaho, buys time for his personal explorations in glass by making commission work, instructing at the torch and in the hot shop, and overseeing the gallery he operates alongside his studio. He also performs a lot of repairs on sentimental glass items. While Vogelpohl considers himself more maker than artist, he loves the process of glassmaking and is grateful for the studio and production lines that allow him to pursue his passion.

Vogelpohl attributes much of the studio's success to his skills as a businessman. *Glass Art* was particularly interested in this case study of a studio that has survived and thrived during the recent nationwide recession. The studio meets the economic expansion with newly renovated space that has itself quadrupled from its previous home. This feature examines the groundwork, laid out over a decade, that makes such expansion possible.

### Testing, Testing

Vogelpohl opened his first commercial studio in Boise, Idaho, in 2001. That 980-square-foot space included a small gallery and was hidden in a strip mall. "It was a kind of test to see if this sort of operation could work here. We stayed at that site for four years, growing incrementally, before we outgrew the space, and I looked for another place downtown." It took six months to find a 2,200-square-foot shop in downtown Boise. The second studio, which was his home for eight years, was on a prime corner with lots of foot traffic and 36,000 cars driving by every day.

In time, however, classes filled and the second building, too, became uncomfortably close. Vogelpohl also grew tired of paying rent for so many years, but the biggest impetus for moving was his need for more space. In 2013, he decided to take the plunge and purchased a 9,000-square-foot building on the other main street in downtown Boise five minutes away from his second location. He plans to expand his existing business model while creating a more comfortable environment for himself and his fellow artists in which to work.

Vogelpohl was recently able to move into his third and latest location, an old ramshackle nightclub. It took him six months to purchase and another five months to extensively renovate the building. He moved his studio, furnace, and equipment into the new space, then set up 12 torch stations and an expanded gallery. The studio reopened in the new location on May 1, 2014.

### Choosing a New Site

Vogelpohl's decisions about a new site were based on some savvy assessment and advance planning. "When I was in my former shop, I saw my customers getting increasingly cramped and knew I needed to grow. I read an article in *Profitable Glass Quarterly* about how to buy a building, where to look, and what to look for. I read that article many times over." He saved money and took the time to develop a solid client base and be assured that his business formula worked in the smaller settings. Then he scaled the business model and enlarged it.

Vogelpohl took two years to identify an area on the outskirts of downtown that was on the verge of rapid growth and chose a building with solid development potential. Across the street from the studio site, a well-known Idaho potato company, Simplot, is building its nine-story multi-million-dollar international headquarters. Inside, they are building a community center known as Jack's Urban Meeting Place (JUMP). The complex is expected to be completed in 2016. A brewery stands next door. Vogelpohl figures both are good anchors for the neighborhood and complement what he is doing with the studio. "With the population and economic growth in Boise, it is a good time to get in on real estate in an area of town that is developing nicely."

Parking is always an issue downtown. Vogelpohl paid the City of Boise to install two-hour parking meters at the front of his new studio where the main thoroughfare previously had none. This creates turnaround parking on the street for his customers. There is also an option of paid parking for \$3 a day across the street, and two dirt parking lots directly abutting the studio.

The new site more than quadrupled his monthly space costs, which required a leap of faith. "Following the 2008 market crash I didn't see any lull in my business, even though everything we make is a luxury and nothing that a person needs to survive. I think it boils down to creating an environment that people love to visit, knowing our customers, being there every day with a consistent product delivered on time, and creating community support for what we do."

Vogelpohl partnered with another artist, an enamellist, to help anchor the business, broaden interest in the studio, and cover the mortgage. Even so, he acknowledges, his latest move has stressed him out more than anything else he has attempted in a lifetime. "There is a lot of learning happening as I go along."



## The Renovated and Expanded Space

The building itself was erected in 1910 and features exposed metal and raw brick. Affordability was a definite hurdle, with Vogelpohl negotiating for months to arrive at the \$800,000 purchase price. The remodel alone ran another \$150,000, going \$60,000 over budget to bring the building up to code with gas lines, a sprinkler system, and other critical features.

Much of the emphasis in renovation focused on accessing more natural light. “We originally had only two windows and one door, so I spent \$15,000 on storefront windows and glass doors, a glass garage rollup door, and 2-by-9-foot panel windows extending across the entire wall.” Now on the side where four lanes of traffic drive past the studio, passers-by no longer confront a blank brick wall. Rather, they see all of Vogelpohl’s chandeliers lit and display cases with glass on pedestals.

The renovated building has two front doors. Visitors enter the gallery door to 2,000 square feet of artwork (vases, chandeliers, lighting fixtures, and bowls). The studio side opens to a torchworking section with five torch stations along the wall. On the other side of the building, torchworking classes are taught at a six-sided table. Beyond them, the hot shop houses a furnace, glory holes, kilns, and other equipment. The cold working room has saws, grinders, and sandblasters. Further on, the enamellist works glass powders over copper and other metals, then bakes her enamels in a 400°F kiln. The furthest station is a 1,000-square-foot metal shop and welding studio. An elevated mezzanine balcony overlooks the entire space and will eventually house a café.

## Marketing the New Location

Foot traffic at the new site is a little lighter than before, though the really dedicated clients and renters found the new Boise Art Glass right away. A good portion of Vogelpohl’s customer base followed him to the new site, which was both personally gratifying and economically essential. He remembers how difficult it was to build an initial customer base when he first began selling glass art for a living.

Vogelpohl works aggressively at marketing. He has reached out more frequently to the 700 people on his mailing list during the transition. “I e-mailed about the building remodel throughout our process to keep the community informed. Signs advertised our move for months ahead, but it is amazing how many phone calls we still receive wondering where we are and if we are still in business.” The *Idaho Statesman* newspaper will carry a story on the studio’s grand opening. It maintains a Facebook fan page, and every staff person is tasked to post something on it every day.

Ongoing, beyond helping customers reconnect to his new location, constant education is an essential part of Vogelpohl’s business model. “Educating the community about how we make glass is critical to selling my work. Sixty percent of our customers aren’t interested in blowing glass themselves as a career or a long-term hobby. They just love participating in the experience and showing something they’ve made to their families and friends. They get very excited about blowing Christmas ornaments for their trees. And every exposure creates a broader awareness of glass and its value. People don’t understand what goes into a piece until they see the process through. Then they recognize the drama of a process where there is never a guarantee when anything could happen at any time. The process is seductive and primal.”

The artist finds it rewarding to see families coming in and coming back to enjoy the experience, being part of a couple’s date nights. “For me, sharing with the larger community, creating an environment where others can enjoy this process that I love—that is very fulfilling.”



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## Staffing an Expanded Studio

Vogelpohl assembled the staff for his growing studio over a period of years. “I went from answering the phone and doing everything myself to needing coverage while I taught a class. Most of my hires have been through friends.” The general manager who has worked with Vogelpohl for seven years came as a 21-year-old with no glass experience. He taught her how to blow glass and do production work, and she gained skills that allowed her to work across various stations before taking on the responsibility of managing the studio.

Three new employees now work the customer-facing roles of booking classes, packaging work for students, and answering phones. All have glass knowledge and can answer questions. They also blow glass at the studio on their own time or as helping hands on production lines.

The studio also engages three instructors to teach classes. One lampwork instructor brings 15 years of experience with glass. Two others staff classes in the hot shop. One instructor worked for years at Dale Chihuly’s furnace in Washington State. Another, following his mother to Boise, started out renting time at Boise Art Glass, then became a friend and eventually an employee.

Bill Rasmussen, one of the pioneers of frameworking, sculpts glass rods at the studio every Wednesday and Saturday. “Bill’s career is proof that this medium can offer an artist a lifetime of possibilities.” During his 62 years at the torch, Rasmussen worked for Disney, owned galleries around the country, developed phenomenal skills, and inspired a generation of glass devotees. He moved to Boise with his wife (a beadmaker) and children, where he found Boise Art Glass and started selling his work there. When his wife passed away from cancer, Vogelpohl didn’t see him for a while. “One day I called him into the studio to work, and he has been coming back ever since. I honestly believe that, at age 84, glassmaking has kept this man alive. Glass has been his livelihood. He is a really neat guy, and it is a treat to have him around.”

## Diversified Business Lines

About half of the annual receipts accrue from classes and rented studio time, and the other half comes from sales and repairs. Thirty percent of Boise Art Glass’ sales relate to wholesale production of glass items for gift shops and galleries beyond the home studio. These production lines include lotion bottles, honeypots, bowls, vases, shot glasses, pens, and business cardholders that are sold online and through catalogues and gift shops. “I still do a few shows. Boise has a big farmers’ market with 180 vendors every Saturday that regularly draws 8,000 people. I’ve done that market for 15 years. The investment of four hours every week generates a great revenue stream and has been a large part of my success.”

Vogelpohl also sells his production lines through a wholesale show for store owners. “They buy my lotion bottles for \$40 and sell them for \$80.” He also does cold calling. Such diversification and active marketing is essential.

Roughly 30 percent of Boise Art Glass sales derive from one-of-a-kind and commissioned pieces. Some of these are Vogelpohl’s own commissions. Others are the work of 12 local glass artists, including all of the studio instructors, who sell through the Boise Art Glass gallery. This venue also provides an outlet for some of the studio’s production work. The range of items for sale encompasses fused, slumped, cast, blown, and frameworked glass. Price points vary from \$5 to \$30,000. Vogelpohl charges artists a 35 percent commission on gallery sales.

Having a partner artist working in another milieu cross-fertilizes and enriches the studio’s offerings. “A lot of my clients come here to blow glass, see the enamellist’s studio, and work between the two. If I need something welded, she can do that for me. On the flip side, she also uses glass enamels in her work to produce cool metal sculptures enameled with glass.” It is proving to be a fruitful and rewarding alliance going into the new and expanded studio. **GA**

*Learn how Filip Vogelpohl works across a broad range of styles and techniques while creating his commission work in the January/February 2015 issue of Glass Art.*