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Perspectives - Benjamin Webb of the Woodruff Arts Center, Atlanta, Georgia

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THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT



Perspectives

Benjamin Webb of the Woodruff Arts Center, Atlanta, Georgia

Benjamin Webb discusses the rewards and challenges in being responsible for facilities management and energy for the largest mixed-program cultural center in the Southeastern U.S. while hosting a tour of Atlanta's Woodruff Arts Center for **Professor James Hagy**, Director of The Rooftops Project.

RTP: *Benjamin Webb is the Maintenance Supervisor and Energy Manager of the Woodruff Arts Center. When we started our conversation, the dramatic high-ceilinged lobby space just off the performing arts theaters was virtually empty. By the time our interview ended, one busload of schoolchildren after another had entered the space for active daytime programming, creating an almost deafening hum of activity. The Center is a vibrant place day and night; in addition to its audiences of adult visual and performance art visitors, the Center's programs reach more than 1,000,000 children each year. For Benjamin's facilities management team, that's a lot of foot traffic.*

RTP: Tell me a little from a facilities perspective about the fantastic cultural complex here.

Benjamin: We have nine buildings total. Six are here [at the main campus in the Midtown district of Atlanta], and then we have one down the street, one over by the Georgia Dome, and one over at Peachtree Street.

It isn't all the same at the Arts Center. Each of them has its own footprint, its own energy use and intricacies. The symphony has different seats than the theater, than the Rich Auditorium. We carry a larger staff than we would normally for one million square feet, because it is always something different. There is no cut and paste anywhere in the facility. We have unique challenges.

When I first started in building management, I thought, "Wow, it must be very difficult to manage a skyscraper." People would always tell me, "Oh no, that is the easiest thing. Two guys do it. Because all of the floors are the same, everything is the same."

RTP: And you have a huge garage as I understand it?

Benjamin: Yes. It is 163,000 square feet. It is all underground, which is nice. It has about 500 spots. You can't see it, so it doesn't seem big. But I walk it every Monday, and it is big.

RTP: And that is sized in part I suppose because you have several venues, and so on a busy night you have lots of stuff going on.

Benjamin: On a busy night it fills up quickly. Luckily, we have Promenade Two, which is the building right across the street. It is about four times as big as our parking garage. It is just massive. I don't think it has ever filled up.



A ROOFTOP VIEW OF THE WOODRUFF ARTS CENTER

The Woodruff Arts Center combines in a single complex four distinct arts divisions, organized within a single not-for-profit organization. The campus includes the High Museum of Art, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Alliance Theatre, the 14th Street Playhouse, and the Center's Young Audiences program, which has the largest arts education program in Georgia. Together they occupy more than 900,000 square feet of space on a 12.25-acre site with capacity for expansion to 18.25 acres.

Originally known as the Memorial Arts Center, the Woodruff opened in 1968 as the Atlanta community's way of honoring and expressing its grief over the loss of the leadership of Atlanta's arts and civic community in a tragic airplane crash during a visit to Paris in 1962.

The High Museum of Art building, designed by Richard Meier, was added to the original campus in 1983. An expansion designed by Renzo Piano as what the Center describes as a "village of the arts," was inspired by the piazzas in Genoa, Italy, where Piano is headquartered. Completed in 2005, it added new galleries as well as administrative and cultural space for the High Museum, plus a residence hall for students, a sculpture studio, and public spaces including a restaurant, piazza, and parking structure. An extensive updating of the campus' original buildings was completed at the same time.

You can see the campus, as well as listen to the Woodruff Arts Center's vision for the role of current and future planned facilities in support of its mission in the visual and performing arts, education, and its place in the Midtown Atlanta corridor, in a brief video presentation of the Woodruff Arts Center Strategic Plan at www.woodruffcenter.org/about-us/Strategic-Plan.aspx.

RTP: You joined the Arts Center in 2005, when construction of the current complex was underway?

Benjamin: Yes. I was in Chicago before that. I was in the Navy. I went into the Navy after high school. If you are from Illinois, they pay for your tuition. So I started at the University of Illinois, and that is where I met my wife. She is from Marietta, and she said let's go, so I came here. I'm finishing up my degree at Kennesaw State University right now. That is how I came to Atlanta.

RTP: What was it like when you arrived?

Benjamin: When I first started working here, the museum [the High Museum of Art] was a skeleton and there were a couple of buildings across the street. These buildings were finished and those buildings were torn down. So it was a big transition time from 2005 to 2008.

RTP: In your responsibility to manage all of these facilities, you naturally spend a lot of time thinking about energy costs. You and your colleagues also believe strongly in sustainable building technologies. How did that series of initiatives get started?

Benjamin: We realized in 2007 that the whole world was becoming more green-conscious. Oil had spiked, energy costs were going up. I believe that we reached a certain point as a nation where we said, "Now what?" The whole country turned inward and said, "What else can we do?" It was at that time that the new LED technology was coming out. There was also new water technology.

I started looking at it from just a cost perspective. I went to my vice president of operations with a couple of proposals: for LED lights, waterless urinals, small things that we could do that would have a big impact. He at the same time was thinking, "We need to be more sustainable. We are an art center, we receive a lot of donations, we are a nonprofit, we depend on a lot of people giving. We need to be good stewards of that."

In a public, for-profit company, it is very easy to determine how it is being run. What are the earnings per share? If that is good and the stock price is going up, everybody is happy. Nonprofits don't have that. We make cuts where we need to, to support our budget. At the same time, we came together and asked, "What can we do from a facilities maintenance standpoint to help meet the goals of the facility to be sustainable, keep energy costs down, lower our carbon footprint?"

I came at this from a cost perspective, and he said, "You reduce your footprint and minimize your energy uses and the savings will follow." It was a good match, him coming from the sustainability standpoint and me coming from the cost-effective standpoint, and we met in the middle. That is when we signed up for the Energy Star program. We were sending off checks to Georgia Power every year for between \$2 million and \$2.5 million just for electricity.

RTP: There are a variety of energy and sustainability programs and certifications in the real estate sector or "built environment." Why did you pick Energy Star?

Benjamin: That was a decision at the most senior management level. We wanted to use a model that had a high profile, but that was attainable. Our building was built in 1968 with no real sustainability issues in mind. Even though we knew that our Energy Star number was not going to be out of this world, it was a template that we could follow that could make a difference.

RTP: How did you use the Energy Star program to achieve those goals?

Benjamin: The Energy Star program has a goal of 10 percent. We wanted to lower that bill, and to lower our carbon footprint, by 10 percent and to make an impact. So we started.

The Energy Star program has you set up an energy team and an energy manager. I took the role of the energy manager, and we pulled together a great group of people. We had our Georgia Power rep. We had a representative from Southface Energy Institute, which is a big nonprofit sustainability organization here in Georgia. We had facilities managers from every building, our procurement manager, and every time we would need another person we would bring another person in.

We were able to make great strides. It is amazing how easy it is to trim 10 percent off your energy uses if you are actually looking. It is the same thing with somebody that doesn't have a budget or that doesn't balance their checkbook. They don't know where their money goes. As soon as you start tracking where it goes, and what is causing it to go there, you can see the



fat that was already baked in. In the first year, we were able to reduce our footprint by 8 percent, and that was without any projects or any grants. One of his favorite sayings was to “get the low-hanging fruit.”

RTP: That was without any capital investment?

Benjamin: Right, that was just saying, “Let’s look at how our air-handlers are running and how our chillers are running, and adjust accordingly.” Anywhere there was a place to cut back on HVAC and lights, we went there. When anybody asks for advice on where to look first, I always recommend your heating and cooling. If your heating and cooling is not in line, it doesn’t matter what you do with your lights. Fifty percent of your energy footprint is HVAC.

ENERGY STAR

You can learn more about Energy Star, a joint initiative of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy, and its diverse programs and educational resources, at www.energystar.gov.

RTP: How hard was it to know what your baseline was?

Benjamin: It was really easy. A lot of it was due to Georgia Power. They have a robust system called EnergyDirect. They allow you to log on and see a lot of historical data, including peak demand, cumulative demand, prices, price per kilowatt.

RTP: I saw that you have a dashboard with information about the Arts Center’s energy consumption, which appears on the Woodruff Arts Center website and also on a big screen monitor in your lobby. Does that information come from Georgia Power, too?

Benjamin: Yes. EnergyDirect is a comprehensive place where you can log in and see your energy usage, and depending on the type and size of your account, you can have real-time data. We take feeds directly off the meters themselves and transfer it in. . . . basically into the Internet.

RTP: Do you manage the properties based on that data, too, and see spikes and figure out what is happening?

Benjamin: Yes. And this data is also a way to know when something is wrong. If you never monitor your water usage, you don’t know that your cooling tower is dumping water. There may be a month of excess water consumption. Or there may be a month of higher electricity usage. That could be due to equipment not working properly. If that happens on November 5th and you don’t get your bill until December 13th, you have had a month of pain. It was very helpful to us, just looking and being much more proactive about finding things wrong before the bill came.

So just in that first year we did well. But we realized that was just the low-hanging fruit. We wanted to push ourselves into the next level. Just at that time, there was an organization called Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta. They had paired with a grant-writing initiative of Southface Energy Institute, called “Grants to Green.” We were working with Southface in 2007, and we were given a grant for an assessment. So they sent out one

of their technicians, and we walked every square foot of this building. She came up with a 200-page comprehensive report, showing where the energy opportunities were and what to do about it.

We are able to use that assessment to give us an overview of what is wrong. With that, we went after a grant that had just come out through the Grants to Green program. It was a one-to-one match for any project that the assessment had recommended that was green. The grant was \$50,000. So we asked, “What are the two biggest impact projects that we could do right now that would be under \$100,000, and would they make a big difference?”

We picked a building that was out by I-285 that was running extremely inefficiently, and we replaced our lights in the parking garage. We had 200-watt metal halides and we replaced them with 75-watt fluorescents.

WOODRUFF ARTS CENTER GREEN INITIATIVES

For more information on the sustainability projects adopted by the Woodruff Arts Center, to see its green dashboard, and to have a look at its green roof grid designed both to impact cooling costs and to reduce storm water runoff, you can visit www.woodruffcenter.org/green/green-home.

For information on the “Grants to Green” program of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta and Southface Energy Institute, go to www.cfgreateratlanta.org/community-initiatives/current-initiatives/grants-to-green.aspx.

RTP: Since your portfolio includes both gallery and performance venues, I imagine that you have spaces that are occupied some of the time, which I assume drives heat up, and then are unoccupied some of the time, too. You have a theater space that is empty one hour, and then filled for several hours, and then empty again. And some of these spaces may have long operating hours, too, compared to the typical office environment?

Benjamin: Yes. At first this was an opportunity. We quickly realized that there were 24 hours in a day, and the symphony may be using it for three. There was no sense in cooling it for 24. So just with small scheduling steps, we were able to trim a lot of that.

There are other times when we have a symphony going, a theater going, Jazz Friday, and some other event. You can easily have 3,000–4,000 people here. Those are times when you just want to get by.

RTP: Am I right that the temperature will change once the space is filled, too? Does this take scheduling to anticipate in advance spaces that will be occupied soon, to pre-cool or pre-heat the facility just before performances?

Benjamin: Yes, you will receive a spike, so if you don’t anticipate it, or your equipment is not up to speed, it will have a big effect. The lights will go on, all these hot bodies walk into there, and you need to be ready for that. That was another unique challenge with managing energy. Managing energy is great, but it cannot affect the performance. It cannot affect the patrons who come here. If we want to save energy by not cooling the ASO [Atlanta Symphony Orchestra hall] all the time, that is great, but when people start walking in there it had better be at 70 degrees, or we have missed our core mission.



We renovated the buildings in 2007. Before that, we had to pre-cool the space to 67 degrees; people would come in and the temperature would come up to 70 degrees and then we would maintain it. Our equipment now is much more efficient in doing what it needs to do.

We have a weekly calendar that is mostly right, and they let you know really quickly if they are in the space and we didn't know they were. There has been some pushback, from folks who want to work off-hours for example, and that want optimal temperatures when just one or a few people are there. But the question is, "Do you really want to spend \$1,000 so you can work?" People who work for nonprofits are a slightly different breed. They are more inward looking, they care more, they care about the environment.

RTP: I imagine that they could also imagine going out to raise that \$1,000. Everyone in nonprofits has tried to do that; they can imagine how hard it is.

Benjamin: Right, especially in this economy. If we are short by \$200,000, where is that coming from? So let's do what we can to trim it off of utility costs.

RTP: I hear all the time from not-for-profits, places of worship for example, where the spaces are smaller or the visitors view themselves as members or "owners," that 50 people will try to adjust the thermostat by themselves, and it is a catastrophe.

Benjamin: There are a lot of small not-for-profits in Atlanta. It seems to be a very common complaint—people messing with the thermostat. We don't have that issue, because our system is big enough that all of our systems are remote. People can stare at it and hope that it gets cooler, but it is not happening unless we do it. We are very grateful that we don't have a lot of button pushers.

RTP: Where is the High Museum of Art in this equation? It is a newer building, obviously. So are those facilities easier to manage, because they are built more recently?

Benjamin: Unfortunately not. I have to maintain 70 degrees, 50 percent humidity, 24/7.

RTP: Because of the collections housed there?

Benjamin: Right. Right now we have a MOMA exhibit. I can't scale back on my air handlers and humidifiers because I want to save on energy. The Energy Star program eventually developed an entertainment facility category. But again, that is an orchestra or a theater that can shut down. We have a very specific mission and requirements for the High Museum of Art. After that has been satisfied, we can see what else we can do to have a sustainable impact and say, "Let's just do the best we can."

RTP: Other art museums have told me of their reluctance to use new or experimental or technology, for the same reason. They view the stakes as just too high. They don't want to be pioneers with their art collections.

Benjamin: Exactly. "Let someone else figure out why that doesn't work. Once you have figured out the bugs, come back to us." That is our biggest energy consumption, and it is for a reason. There is no greater purpose for me and for our mechanics than to keep that air the way it should be.

ARTWORKS ARE VISITORS, TOO

The special exhibit of artworks from New York's Museum of Modern Art, noted by Benjamin Webb in his remarks, was running at the time of our visit and is a perfect example of the opportunities and challenges of running facilities with specialized uses. The exhibit, titled "Picasso to Warhol: Fourteen Modern Masters," included more than 100 works from the MOMA collection. Running for approximately six months from the fall of 2011, group tours set a High Museum of Art record that included more than 36,000 school groups alone.

RTP: You mentioned that you see a value in sustainability certification, whether Energy Star, LEED, or another model. What are the advantages in going for certification?

Benjamin: There is definitely a value in certification. After we started going green, we found that there are a lot of employees that value it. We were able to attract talent that we might not have if we did not have a green presence. To me, the green certification does two main things: One, it provides a very structured environment in which to operate your building, and two, it provides the publicity of doing that. And so I am looking forward to both of those. Right now, for example, we don't have green landscaping or green cleaning. But to go LEED, we would need to have those things in line.

RTP: Is there a spillover benefit by adopting an upgrade at even one building?

Benjamin: Absolutely. We have one building across the way where we are planning to go for LEED. Not only will that building benefit, but my other eight buildings will benefit. If there is something that we implement in that building and we can then implement it in every building, why not? Granted our 14th Street Playhouse may not be LEED certified, but that doesn't mean that it can't benefit from green cleaning or green landscaping.

RTP: So let me ask you about the staff. You have a facilities manager for each building?

Benjamin: Yes.

RTP: And most of your functions are in-house?

Benjamin: There is a line drawn between the museum buildings and every other building. For the museum, there is in-house security, in-house janitorial, in-house maintenance. The other buildings are often called the Woodruff Arts Center. Even though the museum is under the Woodruff Arts Center, saying the Woodruff Arts Center to us means the other buildings. There, we subcontract out our security and our housekeeping. I don't know which one is better. It is in many ways the same, the same people are coming to work and they care.



RTP: You mentioned that you have facilities satisfaction surveys. How do they work, and who participates in the surveys?

Benjamin: We open it up to everyone. We have 600 employees here. We always send it out and we go over the results. Everybody is pretty satisfied. Maintenance always receives high scores, and we are proud of that.

RTP: You have staff here during opening hours, and you have two shifts? You are open as we sit here right now, in the morning, and you are here late at night sometimes. And I presume someone is in the museum buildings always?

Benjamin: Yes, we have security here all the time, and we have 24-hour housekeeping. As far as maintenance engineering goes, the bulk of our guys are here 7 to 4, and then we have one or two guys from 7 to 11, depending on the load. If we are going to have 3,000 people on campus, I'll have an extra guy.

The good part about 7 to 11 is that all the work is done. It is about maintaining. If it is cold in there, make it hot. If there is a leak, shut off the water. So we are currently thinking about adding an 11 to 7 staff. There is a lot that can be done at that time, overnight. It will have a good impact if we go forward to that.

RTP: You have lots of folks coming through here, and lots of students, hundreds of thousands of people a year. Anyone reading this that has ever had responsibility for maintaining a not-for-profit facility may be thinking right now, like me, "Tell me about restrooms."

Benjamin: We touch a lot of unique visitors. We are the fourth or fifth most visited place in Georgia. We are proud of that. We have been pretty lucky; most of the people who come to the art center are great. They are here to see art because they care; they are here to visit the symphony because they believe that it is important. At our amphitheater, where they throw concerts, it can be different. The bathrooms out there need to be much sturdier.

During the renovations here, we have tried to improve the presentation of the restroom, with nice faucets, nice toilets, flush valves, and paper towel dispensers. They have all operated very well. The only real issues we have are on the bottom level, where the public can come in and go out. We went through a phase where someone would come in and break the faucet and leave. I went through five faucets in one year. Luckily, I don't know whether he thought we were on to him or what, but he stopped coming.

RTP: He moved. [laughter]. Part of what you are suggesting, too, I think, is that whether it is on the sustainability side or the upkeep side, everyone who visits has a role in the operation of the facility . . . every guest is making it harder or easier.

Benjamin: Yes. That is absolutely correct.

RTP: It is hard to put in the front page of your orchestra program to keep the restroom clean . . .

Benjamin: [laughter]

RTP: But it makes a big difference.

Benjamin: Yes. That is very true. And that is one of the things we like about our dashboard down there. This is a great opportunity for everybody who comes into the building to see immediately that we are doing something for sustainability. It might also turn a switch in the visitor's head, that this is a company that cares about this and I can be, too, at least while I am here.

RTP: This is the same screen that is on your website?

Benjamin: Yes. It is really cool. Today we'll have probably two thousand kids. If 2 percent of them go over there and touch that, that is 40 kids."

RTP: How many of them will use the restroom?

Benjamin: [laughter]. Probably 1,900 of them.

RTP: Tell me about the student residence hall for a minute.

Benjamin: We had a dorm sitting right there, it was called the Lombardi Hall. It was what was impeding building the new museum. So we contacted Renzo Piano and said, "We want to do a two-phase expansion to our museum. Step one is relocating the dorms." So a building that sits out on 15th Street and Art Center Way is our new dorm. It has six floors, 15 rooms per floor. I don't know if these students know it, but they are living in a Renzo Piano building. I hope they appreciate that, especially the architects."

RTP: These are students from SCAD [The Savannah College of Art and Design]. It is an independent organization?

Benjamin: Yes. We had the Atlanta College of Art, which was 101 years old. The Savannah College of Art and Design acquired it. In that arrangement came a building that was only three years old. The dorm has 75 rooms, so it accommodates 150 students. They have it on a long-term lease. We operate that building.

RTP: So, you have the privilege of providing the operational maintenance for their dorms. And there are never any problems with student residence halls?

Benjamin: No. [laughter]. Nobody has ever stuck a spoon down a garbage disposal and nobody has ever thought that shoes don't go down the toilet. Again, there is nothing like working here, because you can be adjusting humidity for a Warhol painting one minute, and digging out hair from a drain the next because some person doesn't understand you cannot just dump things down the drain. What we have within one city block is as vast as I have ever seen it.

RTP: It looked like in the strategic plan that physical space facilities, the relationship of the home to the mission, gets a lot of thought, a lot of play, which isn't always the case at other nonprofits. . . . Is that your impression? In your comments today, too, there is a reflection that the facilities are strategic to the mission.

Benjamin: Tara Perry [the Center's Vice President of Strategic Planning & Initiatives] joined us and looked at how we could better use our spaces



whenever they stood empty. It was a place that we could use either to bring art to Atlanta or allow Atlanta to come to us and host their event in an art venue. That is our push now, to support our divisions and make the best use possible of our space to carry out our mission. We have been involved in helping remodeling spaces, bringing spaces up-to-date since many of these spaces were from the 1960s. We have been through a lot of changes, steering these spaces into being more useful than they were before.

RTP: I presume you have a pretty steady demand for rentals?

Benjamin: The High is very active with events. A lot of it is corporate visitors. An exhibit opens, and there is the crowd that really appreciates the art and having their event in an art venue. They eat, dine, drink, and walk through and see the art. Whenever we have big events like this, there is no lack of rentals.

RTP: But that puts a big demand on you, too, though?

Benjamin: Right. Every rental has a designer, and every designer has a different vision. We have tried to develop our spaces and retrofit them to be able to support anything, whether you want to project on the ceiling or whether you want to light the entire building. So we are constantly in meetings, and meetings about meetings, and in pre-meetings for those meetings, about what we are going to do to help the client. I always stress to my guys that no matter what happens, we only exist because art exists. Our jobs are only here to put these events on and to have art. So there is no greater calling for you on that day than to facilitate that to happen. And there is no greater calling for me than to help them do their jobs.

Note: The personal interview in this paper was edited for content and space. The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of Joseph Bankoff, President and Chief Executive Officer, and Tara Perry, Vice President, Strategic Planning & Initiatives, at the Woodruff Arts Center, in the development of this article.



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