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Profiles - The Sammons Center

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A historic but disused water pumping station, sited between active freeways, became an early and enduringly successful innovator in mission-centered not-for-profit supportive space for the arts. Brenda Alejo and Professor James Hagy of The Rooftops Project talk with Joanna St. Angelo, Executive Director of the Sammons Center for the Arts in Dallas, Texas. Collaborative and incubator spaces have become a popular and celebrated phenomenon in recent years, both for tech and entrepreneurial startups and for mission-led not-for-profit organizations. Yet examples of this model may be found dating back many years, almost three decades in the case of the Sammons Center for the Arts in Dallas, Texas. The implementation of the organization’s vision also involves an especially curious, and successful, repurposing of a long-vacant property, in this case a now century-old water pumping station that time (and the constant traffic of adjacent freeways) had passed by.

Joanna St. Angelo has been Executive Director of the Sammons Center for the Arts since its opening day in 1988. Even before that, during the visioning and renovation phases of the project, she had been a volunteer of the not-for-profit organization that has come to own and operate the Center.

“Back in 1980, there were two organizations: the greater Dallas Youth Orchestra and Shakespeare Dallas,” Joanna tells us. “They both been getting free space from developers where they could practice or have rehearsals. But every time the developers would get a tenant, they’d constantly have to pick up and move to another location. That really made it difficult. Without continuity, it’s hard for donors and patrons to keep up. It’s just not an ideal situation. So, they joined forces and said, ‘Why don’t we find a place where we could have permanent offices and rehearsal space?’ They put the word out that they were looking.

“John Tatum was one of the first to develop the West End, which is a historic part of downtown Dallas. He had never met an old building he didn’t love. He knew that the city was looking for someone to take over the renovation of this pump station. The city had put out an RFP [request for proposals]. So he brought them here.”

The building was constructed in 1909 as a water pumping station serving the city of Dallas, drawing water from the Trinity River that adjoined the property. The river was diverted in [the late 1930s], and the metropolitan area was increasingly served by more modern facilities. Before its restoration, the building had been idle for some 30 years. “Occasionally, they would bring old, obsolete equipment here, just to get it out of the way,” Joanna recalls. “It sat here empty and neglected, with no windows, no repairs whatsoever.”

The site was in a somewhat awkward location. Even though it is just north of downtown, near redeveloped areas such as Turtle Creek and the well-known Mansion on Turtle Creek Hotel, it is adjoined by Harry Hines Boulevard [a throughway] and the North Texas Tollway. “There was no concern for access to the property,” Joanna explains. “It parallels I-35, and it’s part of a very old neighborhood. Harry Hines Boulevard was widened. Oak Lawn, which runs in front of the building, was widened. This is the most encroached historic site in Dallas. We’re isolated. We’re on a triangular piece of land that is landlocked by three streets. We always say that it’s the land that time forgot.”

Like many opportunities with disused or gifted properties, the walk-through required lots of imagination. “It was a wreck,” Joanna reflects. “Very few people would have believed that you could successfully turn this mess into our art center. There was literally a dirt floor. What is now our main hall was bare. It had no windows and millions of pigeons living in here. It was just horrible. John is very persuasive and very visionary. He painted the picture for them, and they said, ‘Okay, we can at least try.’ We literally had, I think, a week as a deadline. And, lo and behold, this proposal was selected by the city council.”
The arrangement contemplated a long-term, minimal rent lease from the city but required the not-for-profit to raise all of the money for both renovations and operations. The lease, which extended to 2034, was put in place at the outset but was contingent on the organization being able to raise the necessary funds for renovation. Rather than acquiring title, developing the funds, and having the existing performance entities manage the facility, the organizers formed a 501c(3), initially called the Turtle Creek Center for the Arts. A number of prominent Dallas families, including John Sammons, John Taturn, Mark Myers, and Joe Dealey, whose family owned the Dallas Morning News, undertook a capital campaign. Headwinds were a challenge. It was a period of economic recession, and other local projects, such as the Morton Meyerson Symphony Center, were seeking funding at the same time.

“There was great skepticism not just from the city, but from the community at large, as to whether it would work. No one had ever heard of an art incubator,” Joanna notes. “There was no such thing that anyone could find. So it was very improbable that they would be successful. People said things like, ‘Arts groups will never be able to pay their rent,’” They’re not going to get along,’ ‘The building will sit there empty,’ “I think the city thought, ‘What’s the worst that could happen? They’ll clean it up, fix it up, it’s not going to work, and then they’ll give it back to us and we won’t have to spend any money.’”

The project engaged Architexas, a firm of local architects with an interest in preservation. The project required the total renovation of the building, from the exterior brick to an interior gut. “It’s a four-story building but looks like a three-story building from the outside,” Joanna relates. “It never had any floors in it. There was no floor in the turbine room. It had catwalks and little spiral stairways that took the workers up into the upper areas to work on the equipment. There was an enormous crane on the roof that they used to move things around. That all had to come out. There was seepage in the basement.”

As incremental funds became available, renovation went ahead. “John Sammons was famous for getting his buddies together for a poker game or something in a hotel room. Then none might leave until he got money from each one. There was a lot of that kind of persuasion going on. Charles Sammons owned a huge business called Sammons Enterprises, a private company. He was looking for an opportunity to recognize the 50th anniversary of his primary business, which was an insurance company. Charles Sammons just one of those happy coincidences where we just came along at the right time. The project was well enough along that there wasn’t really any issue as to whether they were going to be able to complete it. He passed away not long after we opened.” His significant gift allowed the project to proceed, and the building was named for Mr. Sammons.

“It opened on March 1, 1988. That was my first official day here,” Joanna notes. “We were full in eight months, and we’ve had a waiting list ever since. There are no comparable spaces. We are subsidizing everyone who uses the facility. Our rents are very low. We’ve always had to fundraise for the difference between what we earn and what it really costs to run a 107-year-old building.”

While some may see the Sammons Center as fundamentally an incubator space, Joanna sees the mission as much broader than that. “We do serve that purpose for some of the smaller working groups or those that are regrouping,” she says. “The primary focus initially and to this day is providing the facility. But we are more like a habitat or a greenhouse for performing arts groups. Our mission is to grow the arts here locally in our community, the greater North Texas area. We do that by supporting the artists.”

The facility itself provides office space, as well as multi-purpose rooms that are used by resident organizations for auditions, rehearsals, performances, workshops, and special events. Some users even bring in audio equipment and hold recording sessions. The Center offers arts education programming for both youths and adults. Adults may participate in a community orchestra, a chorus, or a dance program.

The property had been landmarked, which protected it from future expansion of the nearby tollway. But landmark status also imposed limitations on design, a challenge faced by many historic properties planned for adaptive reuse. “We had to work around all that,” Joanna details. “We rebuilt and reconstructed from old photographs what we think that entrance looked like. We literally have floors going in the middle of windows in some places, but it was handled very cleverly by the architects.”

The designers found aesthetic advantages, too. “We have enormous beams and structural columns that that look cool, running from the first floor all the way up to the fourth floor,” Joanna points out. “Everyone is fooled by them. They think that we just painted and carpeted, but we literally rebuilt the whole thing from the inside out. It was a monumental task. To this day, when I look at the before and after pictures, I’m amazed that anyone could believe that it could be done and that it actually got done for $3 million.”

While this was some 10 percent over budget, the extra costs were associated with unavoidable installations that included fire stairs, an elevator, and air conditioning.
conditioning. Bathrooms had to be installed from scratch; there were none. The site’s isolated location precluded several other upgrades, such as the installation of a gas line.

As with most music performance spaces, acoustics were another central focus. “They are really critical,” Joanna says. “What have become wonderful acoustic spaces are the rooms that had the pumps in them. One of these, Meadows Hall, is our main hall. It is about 2,800 square feet, with the ceilings 45 feet [tall] at the peak. It’s all historic brick walls and lots of windows. It has a big, floating, maple floor for the dance groups and is multipurpose. Our acousticians, [Joiner Rose Group], created a plan with acoustic baffles. We got a grant from the Meadows Foundation to work with three wonderful textile artists here in Dallas. The team was lead by Sue Benner, who was a fabric artist here. They hand-wove wool, selecting dyes that would be as color-fast as possible because that room has tons of windows. They found someone to make huge square frames. These are works of art. They’re absolutely beautiful. They have faded over time, but they were woven in such a way that the natural fading makes them look more and more impressionistic as they fade. We thought that it was wonderful that we could use artists and create works of art to solve that problem. We also put an acoustic canopy in at the ceiling level. We’ve done as much as you can really do.

“Kurth Hall, up on the fourth floor, is our smaller recital space. It’s about 1,200 square feet, about half the size of our main hall. There we just did a ceiling treatment. The room is kind of live, but singers love it because it sounds like singing in the shower. Adjacent to that is a studio that is the most soundproof room in the house. It can be used for auditions, for technicians when auditions are going on in Kurth Hall, as a green room before rehearsals, or as a secondary meeting room if our conference room is booked. It has a variety of uses.”

The acoustic improvements were made after the Center moved in and occupied the building, which Joanna sees as an advantage. “There were lots of things that would not have worked had they been preplanned. The executive director for the renovation said he was only going to be here for a few months, that it was going to be my baby, and that I needed to figure it out. So I did. I think you just take an organic approach. You respond to concerns and issues as they come up. You try to be as creative as you can, and to make sure that you’re not falling in love with the problem, but that you’re trying to fall in love with the solution.”

The primary use of the Center is for rehearsals. “We’re trying to meet the core needs of groups, which are performance, rehearsal, and meeting space and some technical resources,” Joanna says. “All of the rooms are multipurpose. They can serve theatre, chorus, orchestra, jazz, and dance, and they sometimes get reset two or three times a day. There’s no fixed stage, and there’s no fixed seating. We have a huge selection of folding tables of all sizes and shapes and risers that we bring out when needed. We provide beautiful Steinway pianos, chairs, and music stands. We want to be as flexible as we can so that they can do it in a way that works for them. For performance, we use the Meadows Hall for our jazz series and Kurth Hall for our cabaret series. Given the large number of organizations and the primary focus on rehearsal functions, there is no formal box office. But organizations holding public events can place check-in tables at the entrance on performance nights.

“Turtle Creek Chorale has Tuesday night for their rehearsals. They have Sundays. So they get first call on all the Tuesday nights. And then whatever Tuesday nights they’re not using, those roll back to us. Then we go to the Greater Dallas Youth Orchestra. They have Sundays. So they get first call on all the Sundays. We book everybody in the building first. Whatever is left over after, we book up to six months in advance on a first-come, first-served basis. In January, we book the first six months and around May, we’ll do the rest. We don’t have very many nights where we don’t have something. Once in a while, you might call me today for a space tomorrow, and I might have something if someone cancels or if no one claimed it.”

The Center also has a third category of users, called Dallas Arts Resource System (DARS) clients. DARS participants are offered virtual offices and a place to receive mail, to make copies, and to book rehearsal or meeting spaces when available. One DARS participant, the Asian Film Festival, has programming only a few months each year but receives film submissions from...
around the world year-round. Others may be all-volunteer organizations. The arrangement also suits start-up organizations that may be in a small-scale, experimental phase.

“Offices are tucked in around the building wherever we can fit them,” Joanna points out. A couple of them are pretty large, a [few] hundred square feet. I have 14 resident groups stuffed into 5,000 square feet of office space. Some are in dedicated offices. They have doors and their own locks and keys. We do vacuum for them and take out their trash, but they care for their own space. We also allow groups to cohabitate. I have five groups in cubicles. We have groups of every discipline and in every size and every state of development. They'd all like to have more space, but there's no way to expand what we have.

“My three office staff members are also in that area. I have eight staff. Our assistant director, Michael Cook, oversees all the bookings and the building repairs, helps with bookkeeping, and is our resident IT guy. We have a full-time building maintenance manager who handles all the cleaning, setups, and takedowns, all by himself most of the time. I have a part-time janitor who comes in and helps when we have big concerts or [events].” Other user organizations, including the large choruses and orchestras, handle their own setup. This reduces the need for off-hours paid staff to be present. The Center requires completion of a training program for anyone issued keyed access to the space. There is a system of fines for leaving the air-conditioning system on or triggering the building alarm.

The participating organizations pay for variable usage. “They get charged for rehearsals use, for copying, and for postage,” Joanna explains. “Our copiers, I have to say, are fabulous. They print in every size and do amazing things. We buy them outright. I have an arrangement with a company that, when they get copiers back from law firms, they refurbish them, and they sell them to me for cash. With leases, you're paying a lot more for the copier than if you just bought it outright, and you also have to pay property tax on it [in Texas] because you don’t own it. I’m just allergic to paying any kind of tax because we're tax-exempt, so we buy them and keep maintenance contracts on them to provide the toner and the staples. That’s worked out really well. I’ve used the same company for years.”

Public transportation access is a challenge. The nearest DART station, the Dallas train [light rail] system, is eight long blocks away, and part of the eight-block route is not served by pedestrian sidewalks. Bus service does not run late in the evening. An onsite and several nearby parking lots serve the property for major events. A valet service allows cars to be parked double and triple deep. On rehearsal days, sometimes the shortage of parking may itself limit the number of rooms that can be booked. Groups holding rehearsals may park elsewhere and carpool to the site. These inconveniences have not proven a drawback for the Center’s popularity. “Everybody deals with it,” Joanna concludes. “Everybody wants to be here. It’s the only place in town for rehearsals for the small and mid-size groups.”

The high level of utilization poses some challenges. “Doing maintenance here is really hard,” Joanna says. “We literally have to book it for those few times per year that aren’t busy, like the first two weeks in January, and maybe in July. So we book our own painting schedules and major repair schedules so that we don’t have to kick someone out of their time slots.”

While the Center does not provide catering, it does permit outside caterers or even restaurants to provide food for events, subject to Center staff approval and evidence of insurance. There are five to six pages of posted rules, and caterers are required to initial every page. “We really don’t have a lot of problems with that. It’s a hassle, but we’re the cheapest place in town for a special event,” Joanna notes. Texas state liquor laws are complex, and the Center has not pursued getting its own premises license.

Volunteers help with special events: ushering, bartending, ticket-taking, food service.

“We have a regular pool of volunteers,” Joanna explains. “The jazz people just love jazz. For some people, that’s the only way to see it. We’re the premier and longest running jazz series in Dallas that features only local artists. You can’t get a ticket to it, it’s sold out. Cabaret is a new program, about five years old now. It’s the same; sold out every single one. So if you want to see it, you’re going to have to volunteer.”

Demand for space from its own organizations is one of several reasons why, in 2000, the Center decided to end bookings for weddings or other outside events. “We used to do that. It was horrible,” Joanna says. “First of all, we don’t have the time. Nothing is available. It’s a conflict with mission, because they often need Saturday nights, for example, but so do the arts groups. Also, if you really do a true cost-benefit analysis and look at the indirect costs and the amount of staff time, it’s hard to make money. And weddings are a once-in-a-lifetime kind of event. Most people have never done one. They want to make changes to things that can’t be changed and require a lot of handholding. There is liability. There is also the wear and tear on the building. I got one of those early morning calls; someone had broken a lavatory fixture right off the wall and smashed it on the floor. So we did away with it. We just don’t do that anymore. That saved us a bundle.”

Initially, the Center invited representatives of resident organizations onto its governing board. But, through experience, this practice changed. “They all asked after a couple of years to not be on the board anymore,” Joanna reports. “They are busy, and they didn’t feel the need. They sometimes also felt conflicted. If we had to raise prices, for example, they understood our situation, but it was hard on their organizations.” The relationship with the resident organizations is sustained in less formal ways. “We work so closely with our organizations,” she says. “My office is right in the lobby.” Joanna
wave[d] at two tenants who were leaving just as she was making this point to us. "If they need something, which they often do, they knock on my door or they tell Michael."

"The composition of the board has evolved over time," she notes. "We always want to have a couple of attorneys, a couple of accountants, a couple of community volunteers. I love bankers, too, as many bankers as I can get. It’s a combination. We don’t always ask for board members to nominate people because we don’t want cronyism. We really want to be targeted, to look for specific people. I always have a list going of probably 20 or 30 potential board members."

Like many other organizations, the Center has an advisory board that can be used to promote board member development and to engage past members of the governing board. The Center is also broadening the use of committees (programming, finance, building) to spend board members’ time effectively. One current project is a feasibility study for a possible second building as a way to expand programming. Another project involves offering training and education to member organizations.

Joanna, together with Lynette Payne, Suzanne Smith, and Jennifer M. Ware, penned “Too Often, Board Members Sabotage the Success of Nonprofits,” an opinion piece for the Chronicle of Philanthropy on board training and the effective use of boards. The authors’ views evolved from deficits they had seen in other organizations. Joanna drew on her 28 years of experience in the social sector.

“I’d say that about 75 percent of the problems are really caused by board members who don’t understand how these organizations work and don’t understand their roles,” Joanna has concluded. “So, that’s an area we’re particularly interested in. For our own organization, we give pretty robust onboarding. We vet our candidates very carefully. If they’ve been on a board, I try to find out what kind of board member [they] were. Did they cut meetings? Did they participate? Were they respectful? Sometimes you can’t get that information, but we try to get to know them.

“My board is an oversight board for the most part. They’re really here to help us with our strategic planning, with oversight of our finances, making sure that we continue to adhere to the mission. They’re a sounding board for ideas and a place to get advice. They’re here to be ambassadors. We have a staff to run the organization so they don’t really need to do that.

“We give them more information than they probably would ever want to have—a pretty big binder that has every fact we can think of relating to the organization in it,” Joanna explains. “Then we tell them that they should sit back their first year and learn how this [organization] works. We get them on a committee and ask another board member to be their board member buddy.

“The first thing I tell them in onboarding is, ‘Do no harm.’ I mean that sincerely. They [may] come from a business and sometimes think they know better than we do. Or they [may] make the assumption that we don’t know what we’re doing. The second rule is, ‘It ain’t broke so don’t fix it.’ It’s all done very diplomatically. We want to make sure that they thoroughly understand board governance before they jump in and try to take over or micromanage.”

The Center’s deliberate and cautious approach is equally reflected in financial planning. “We have a very diversified funding model here that’s taken me 28 years to build,” Joanna says. “We have an endowment of $3.5 million. When we have a really good year, we harvest the earnings off of that and put it away for future years. We’re also the only arts organization in Dallas that has a capitalization plan and a funded, seeded capital reserve. We have put another $1.5 million into the building in just the last four years. I know that in about 14 years, I’m going to replace all of my air handlers again. We put that money away so we have it when we need it. I have a spreadsheet that has everything we have in the building, all of the things we’ve done to the building, when we did it, what it cost, what its lifespan is, what its projected replacement costs would be, and when that’s going to happen. That way I know, year by year, how much money we’re going to need to put away. In 20 years, I will have the money to do an elevator modification.” Private donors or government grants are sometimes sources of funding for one-time capital facilities enhancements, too. “If I had a $25,000 gift tomorrow, I would probably put in a permanent sound system in Meadows Hall with lights and video feed.”

Unlike many not-for-profit organizations that own their buildings, Joanna finds herself seldom surprised by unbudgeted major repair needs. “We take really good care of the building,” she says. “I’m allergic to deferred maintenance. When you have an air conditioner go out or something like that, it can be pretty difficult. About three years ago, we found a 107-year-old sewer pipe under the driveway that had to be replaced. That was a $10,000 repair. That’s why we’ve got a capitalization plan. We got consultants to help us with that. We didn’t get a big grant, but it was a really helpful process.

“We were really fortunate,” Joanna acknowledges. “We had a challenge grant from Sammons Enterprises. Mrs. Sammons, the widow of Charles Sammons, was a major supporter for many years. She passed away, and Sammons Enterprises approached us. They offered a $2.5 million challenge if we could raise $2.5 million, with the stipulation that $3.5 million would be put
in an endowment and the balance would be used to fix the building. Tragically, the day after we signed that agreement, the recession hit. We called it the Legacy Campaign. It was a tough slog, but we were able successfully to raise that money. That was a great benefit to us, because we were able to establish that endowment. We have stabilized the Sammons Center financially. Our balance sheet is really the envy of every arts organization in Dallas. I have a million dollars in cash. My building is in very good repair.”

For the Sammons Center, success in mission and programming creates a desire for more capacity. “We need more space,” Joanna concludes. “I have 30 groups waitlisted who want office space here. There’s so much need for more facilities. A second facility is something that we’ve been thinking about for a long time now. We’re very serious about that.”

While the Center would prefer a location proximate to the existing building, market conditions and the building’s situation near the tollway and major arterial streets make this unlikely. “Of course, now, property values have skyrocketed in Dallas,” Joanna says. “That’s what our building committee is working now. Anything near the city center is unbelievably expensive. Our goal is to create the best and most efficient and wonderful arts groups and artists in the world. Everything we can do to support that mission is our long-term goal.”

What else is ahead? The Center has just completed a strategic plan that envisions a not-for-profit management center to provide training and consulting. “We’re calling it Sammons Institute and creating ongoing trainings and seminars,” Joanna notes with enthusiasm. “In a very casual way, we’ve always done training and consultation with our arts groups, both resident and non-resident. I have a brown-bag lunch series once per month. It’s free. We’re going to provide ongoing education to help groups grow, to become more sustainable and more efficient, and to stay current on IRS regulations, FASB [Financial Accounting Standards Board] rule changes, and changes in the landscape for fundraising. All of those areas are critical to their abilities to grow and thrive.”

Brenda Alejo (Class of 2018) is an associate with the Center for Real Estate Studies and hopes to pursue a career in transactional law. After her first year of law school, she worked at a non-profit real estate organization in New York City. As second-year law student, she has focused her studies on financial and real estate compliance. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Texas State University.