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CDNS 5403

Sustainable Heritage Case Study
Class Presentation
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Reviving Cultural Heritage:

Constructing the Judith and
Norman Alix Art Gallery in Sarnia,
Ontario

Location



Left: Satellite image of Downtown Sarnia (courtesy Google Maps)
Right: View of Thom Block from Kenwick Building (courtesy John Roshon, Flickr)

The Judith and Norman Alix Art Gallery (JNAAG)

- **The Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery**
 - a free public art gallery located in Downtown Sarnia, Ontario.
 - With over 1,100 works of Canadian art in the permanent collection, and the support of 400+ members and a keen volunteer team, the gallery serves an immediate community of 128,000 people across Lambton County.
 - Vision: Support the community by being a safe space that provides creative opportunities for people to connect, share stories, and discover new insights through art.
- **Construction Project**
 - In 2009, the County of Lambton decided to relocate the county gallery, and began reviewing proposed locations
 - The 1893 J.S. Thom Block, a historic building in the heart of Downtown Sarnia, was chosen as the site of the new gallery
 - Construction of the new gallery was funded by private, municipal, provincial, and federal stakeholders
 - Vacant for 25 years, the interior of the building was demolished and replaced with a new structure that met the requirements of a category 'A' gallery

J.S. Thom Building 1893 - 2010



J.S. Thom Building, 2010 (photo courtesy of NAG Project, Flickr)

Timeline: J.S. Thom Building

- 1890: McLellan Hotel is destroyed by fire
- 1893: Major J.S. Thom erects building for photography firm
- 1893 - 1920: J.S. Thom photography studio (2nd floor)
- 1893 - 1960: Dominion Bank and Manley's Stationary (1st floor)
- 1960: Saks Women's Clothiers (1st and 2nd floors)
- 1977: Saks purchases and installs c. 1870 staircase
- 1986: Saks closes
- 1986 - 2010: Thom Block is vacant

Timeline: JNAAG Construction

- 2009: Thom Block chosen as site of new gallery
- Aug. 2010: Demolition of interior begins
- Sept. 2010: Support beams installed to brace façade
- Feb 2011: work begins on third level
- May 2011: lead paint removed from façade
- June 2011: Roof installed
- July - Aug. 2011: Brick repointed
- Oct 2011 - March 2012: Interior construction
- July 2012: Permanent collection moved to new gallery
- October 2012: Gallery opens to public

Stakeholders

Government

- City of Sarnia
- County of Lambton
- Province of Ontario
- Heritage Canada

Private

- Judith and Norman Alix Foundation
- Donors

Architect

- Alar Kongats

Community

- Downtown businesses and residents
- Lambton County residents
- Gallery members/staff/volunteers

Construction

- Empire Restoration
- Maple Industries

Consultants

- SNC Lavalin

Natural/Cultural Heritage

Natural Heritage

- **Primary Corridor:** regionally important concentrations of natural heritage features and/or large, naturally vegetated, natural areas
- **St. Clair River:** Water flows south from Lake Huron to Lake St. Clair. Designated an international Area of Concern due to pollution

Cultural Heritage

- **Thom Building, 1893:** Home to the J.S. Thom photography studio, the building is significant to Sarnia's artistic and business history
- **May 21, 1953:** The Thom Block was one of the few Victorian buildings to survive the Great Tornado unscathed
- **Historic 1870's staircase:** originally from one of Sarnia's earliest banks, the stairs were installed in the building in 1977
- **JNAAG Permanent Collection:** The gallery houses impressive permanent collection purchased by the Sarnia Woman's Conservation Art Association

The Great Tornado



Front Street after the Tornado, May 1953, Courtesy John Roshon, Flickr
Front Street c. 1910, courtesy Sarnia Historical Society

Sustainability

Economic

- Sarnia Integrated Community Sustainability Plan: Economic growth through encouragement of destination tourism through Judith and Norman Alix Art Gallery

Socio-cultural

- Conservation of historic façade contributes to community identity/cohesion
- County of Lambton Community Sustainability Plan: Free public access to Class 'A' Gallery will enhance quality of life in

Environmental

- Urban location encourages active transport
- Removal of lead paint from the exterior

Judith and Norman Alix Art Gallery



Photo courtesy of JNAAG Project Blog, October 2013

Lessons

- **Competing sustainabilities in heritage:**
 - For the County of Lambton, the project's social sustainability was prioritized over the environmental sustainability of retaining the façade
- **Defense of facadism**
 - Dennis Rodwell dubbed facadism “architectural taxidermy... that trivializes the built environment as theatrical scenery. It disguises major destruction of the physical and social fabric and to cultural identity” (2003, p. 62)
 - Construction of JNAAG saved the edifice of a historically significant building while strengthening the social fabric and cultural identity of Sarnia-Lambton
- **High cost of environmental sustainability**
 - SNC Lavalin's 2009 site assessment suggested construction for LEED certification, but budget restrictions prevented fulfilment of this recommendation

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