

MAKING SPACES FOR ART

THE JUDITH & NORMAN ALIX ART GALLERY

Building a *Category A* Art Gallery

The saying goes *it takes a village to raise a child*, but it took a community to build the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery in Lambton County. Previously the Art Gallery of Lambton, the JNAAG is a regional community gallery with a national mandate. The JNAAG engages with every artistic practice and media, from painting to performance art, and offers contemporary exhibitions



And so it begins – the historic Thom building under construction

that celebrate visual arts and Canadian artists of national and regional calibre. The gallery provides the community of Lambton County with exciting access to exhibitions, programming and professional development opportunities. With a broad mandate and programming aplenty, the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery needed the perfect place to call home.

Like many regional community galleries, the JNAAG started out within the local library, first the Carnegie Library and eventually occupying a floor of the Sarnia Public Library and Art Gallery. When the latter ultimately expanded from being a city library to a county library, the gallery set out to find a new space. After many years in an interim location, a strategic plan and a number of community consultations identified the need for a new art gallery for the people of Lambton County. With significant community interest behind the effort, the search for a permanent home began. There were more than a dozen different sites across Lambton County identified as a possible home for the gallery. Combined with thorough feasibility studies, the committee charged with reviewing the sites kept one key thing in mind as they analyzed the options: will this location bring catalytic potential for the community? A scoring system

that considered both the physical space and the community impact identified the historic Thom building as the best possible option for the future gallery.

The Thom building (often referred to as the Saks building) is one of Sarnia’s most historically significant buildings, with a central location at the heart of Downtown. The building had many past lives, as a bank, dentist office and department store to name a few. By serendipitous coincidence, the building was originally built by photographer Major John Strathearn Thom as his studio and shop. The wheels were set in motion for the new JNAAG to take over the space - after 25 years dormant, the building would be returned to its artistic roots. But just how does a 124-year-old building become a state-of-the-art art gallery?

Grand as the Thom was, 25 years unoccupied take their toll. “The construction project was less a renovation and more a new build,” JNAAG Curator and Director Lisa Daniels tells us. A decision was made to preserve as much of the building’s historic façade as possible, but it was discovered the bottom section of the façade was deteriorated beyond repair. The team behind the JNAAG turned lemons into lemonade and rebuilt to include the



Flying buttresses held up the old façade of the historic Thom building

floor-to-ceiling windows the building boasts today. The new windows were rooted in the community-consciousness behind the build – to break down all barriers between the gallery and the community, physical or otherwise. Aside from the façade, the interior of the building was fully demolished. This left the County free to purpose-build their facility in a way that met all the contemporary requirements for a Category A collecting gallery.

Museums and galleries are granted Category A designation by the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), an agency of the Department of Canadian Heritage. This designation considers everything from how art can move through your space to environmental controls and the thickness of external walls. Since the JNAAG was not constrained by the floorplan of the original building, they were able to work with the CCI as

well as their architects and developers to design a building that thoughtfully considered the art held within its walls. Lisa calls these early conversations with CCI “critical,” as it simplifies the designation process down the road. For readers who aren’t in the midst of purpose-building a new facility but are interested in being a Category A gallery, Daniels suggests working in more manageable pieces. “The nice thing with the designation,” she says, “is you can designate one space within your facility. So if you have three galleries, you could do one space and your collections room [...] and still accept those heritage donations [and] borrow from other Category A museums, as long as the work in question is held within those designated spaces.”



The illusion peak in the centre appears to stand for Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery

Of course, a project as big as a purpose-built facility doesn’t come without the occasional bump in the road. Speaking from experience, Daniels explains that you have to go into any capital project knowing there will be roadblocks, and instead of getting around them, work through them. “It’s a totally different mindset,” she affirms. One of the roadblocks encountered during the construction of the JNAAG came in the form of a three-dimensional peak on the roof of the building. In order for the gallery to maximize space, they found

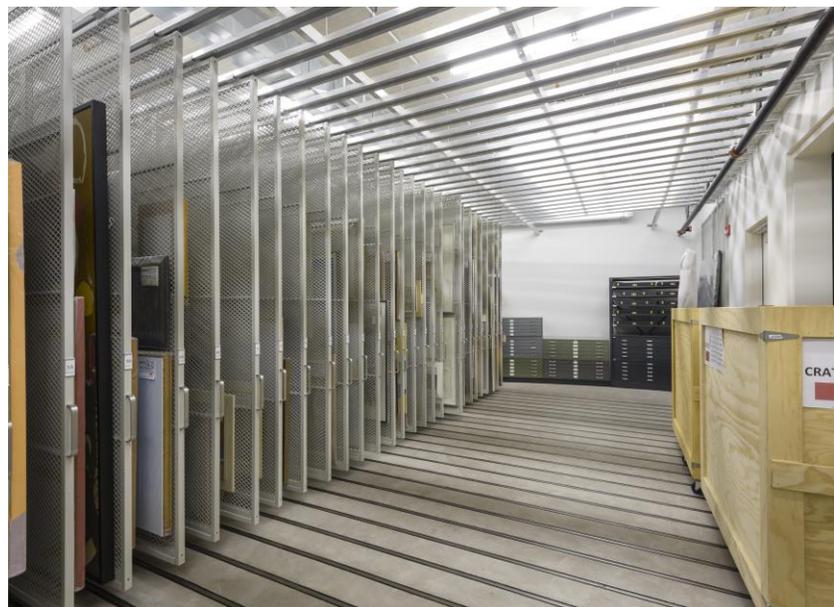
they were not able to maintain the peak. Wanting to maintain as much of the building’s historical integrity as possible, the JNAAG brought the local historical society and building architects into conversations about how they could find a way to work through the problem. The result? The team agreed to suggest a peak through the modern letters added to the building’s roof. Sitting between the ‘A’ and ‘G,’ the illusion peak now suggests ‘Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery’ while also alluding to the building’s rich architectural past.

From determining a prime location to physical building design, the team behind the JNAAG kept the community front-of-mind through the entire renovation process. Lisa Daniels credits the county of Lambton, working together with community groups, artists and other municipalities as partners in the new

JNAAG coming to fruition. In particular, she notes the City of Sarnia’s support of the downtown revitalization project, which complemented the build of the JNAAG with improved street infrastructure and the ramping up of a downtown business façade improvement program. The architecture and construction firms behind the build (Kongats Architects and PCR Windsor, respectfully) maintained a community consciousness in their use of local resources and contractors throughout the construction process. The JNAAG continues to strive to make a significant local economic impact by purchasing local furnishings when possible and supporting local services and sources during exhibitions and major events.

When asked if she has advice for organizations and facility managers taking on renovation projects on a similar scale, Lisa offers the following: don’t overbuild. “There is a fantasy or notion that if you build a bigger gallery, [you’ll] engage more people, but you have to be realistic about what your community can support.”

Elaborating, she explains, “you can’t overpromise – [...] you have to deliver on everything you said you [would] bring to the community.” She also stresses the importance of investing in artistic programming and making sure it grows with your space. “It’s not just a new facility,” she says, “but a new organization and threshold of delivery of service.” Her last key piece of advice? Never



The Collections Room at the JNAAG

underestimate the amount of storage and behind-the-scenes space. “It’s a difficult thing to argue for,” she says. “There are optics around [renovating] a gallery that assumes a significant increase in exhibition space. It means storage, a collections room, an acclimation space, shipping and receiving...” and the list goes on. Those key behind-the-scenes spaces are where the expansion happens and should be a key consideration for any renovation project.

In terms of what’s next for the JNAAG, Lisa tells us they are approaching a review of their organization and their facility. “It takes 3-5 years to get to know your building and how you function in it,” she tells us of the

review process. The original structure of the JNAAG was based on a one-floor facility – now having three stories and a basement, the way they operate has changed significantly. “In many ways we tripled in size,” Lisa tells us. When it comes to a new facility, Daniels stresses the importance of sticking to your promises and the importance of reviewing successes and setbacks. “When we were reviewing our plan [for the new facility],” Lisa says, “we wanted to make sure that within the first three-year cycle we were able to accomplish everything we promised this new gallery would do for the community.” For the JNAAG, this meant bringing in major exhibitions from outside the community (accomplished with 2015’s *Masterworks from the Beaverbrook Art Gallery*), maintaining free admission and engaging the community and local artists. Having ticked these boxes, the JNAAG is now both looking back to the past three years and forward, strategically planning for the next 3-5 years, which will coincidentally include their 10th anniversary. We look forward to seeing how the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery celebrates this exciting milestone from their beautiful Category A facility.