

History repeating itself

From military to retail, Penn Field continues to serve a variety of Austin businesses

by AUTUMN RHEA CARPENTER
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Penn Field on South Congress Avenue has worn many faces over the past century and has served a variety of industries, including military, educational, communications and retail. The mixed-use tradition continues as it now houses a variety of businesses in South Austin, including Ruta Maya Coffee Co., Clear Channel Communications, Austin Playhouse, David Neuse Photography, Architerra, Urban Dentistry and many more commercial offices.

The 230,000-square-foot renovated retail and business complex has been selected as the winner in the mixed use category for the 2004 Commercial Real Estate Awards.

The \$13 million project began in 2000, during the beginning of an economic downturn.

"It's usually cheaper to tear down a building, rather than struggle to get it up to transportation, zoning and fire code standards," says project architect Michael Antenora of Antenora Architects. "Luckily we were able to create a viable space that was useable and still unique and within the budget. Adaptive re-use is a very valuable tool during a down-turned economy. The results have really exceeded all of our expectations."

Southwest Strategies Group Inc.'s six partners developed Penn Field's latest renovation. They are Peter Barlin, Daniel

Roth, Abe Zimmerman, Stan Biderman, Rob Zippincott and John Rosato.

Rosato defined the development firm's philosophy.

"We are strong believers in adaptive re-use and sustainable architecture and this particular project testifies to that fact," he says. Other Southwest Strategies projects include Sayers Market on 5th Street, The San Jose Hotel and Guero's Restaurant.

The partners agreed with Antenora that sustainable re-use was a viable plan to follow on the Penn Field project.

"We directly re-used or fabricated a large portion of materials that already existed there, including steel frames, brick masonry and wood," Antenora says. "Aluminum was introduced to the storefront. By using the materials that existed on the property, we saved important energy that would have been used to transport the materials. That also adds a double meaning to the 'mixed use' term."

After all of this effort goes into recycling materials, energy use is still factored into the design formula.

"On the Penn Field project, we utilized several shading devices, which allowed us to reduce the electricity load requirement," Antenora says. "We created a place that doesn't require excessive utilities, that recycles its grey water and that makes use of its natural light."

Since the facility houses a variety of businesses, the design expectations for

each building varied, according to Rosato.

"Penn Field maintains an unusual atmosphere," he says. "The retailers are attracted to it for many reasons and there is a broad spectrum of appeal."

The 16-acre property is currently 87 percent leased in an area with a vacancy rate of 23 percent.

"We didn't want to pre-anticipate for each building," Antenora says. "Some of the buildings just fell down and that automatically created a blank slate. In the case of the Clear Channel building, it was such a large space that we needed to remove the columns to open up the space. Each building held its own set of challenges."

The property was judged for various criteria, including architectural design, site design, environmental advancement, community need and visionary impact. Awards Judge Neal Kocurek, president and CEO of St. David's HealthCare System, evaluated the project's community need.

"Penn Field scored highly because it took an existing heritage and modernized it," he says. "They managed to retain the facility's integrity while adding warmth and culture. There aren't many historical buildings in Austin and this is a step in the right direction."

Maintaining history was an important factor in Antenora's original plans, he says.

"This project started at the beginning of the millennium," he says. "We managed to reflect the previous hundred years and

foresee the next hundred years. We succeeded in connecting Penn Field's industrial past with its modern future."

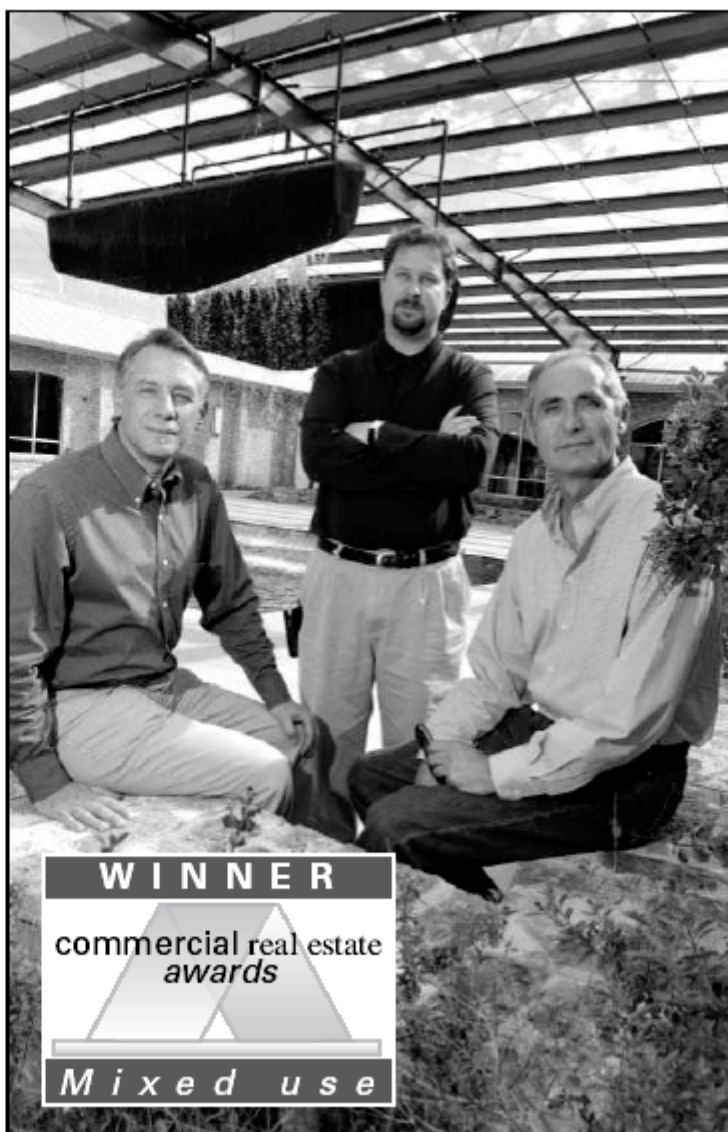
Architectural design Judge Stephen Sharpe, editor of *Texas Architect* magazine, applauded the Penn Field team for its vision.

"The reclamation and adaptation of Penn Field is most remarkable because razing all the structures and starting over with new construction probably would have been easier and more profitable for the developers," he says. "But they recognized the aesthetic value of those old brick buildings and used the existing steel substructures to wonderful effect. As a result, the complex of buildings maintains a visual coherence that celebrates history while adapting to today's commercial needs. The developers deserve applause for taking a gamble and staying committed to their vision."

Professional photographer David Neuse says, "We've been tenants for the past two years and love it here. The management has done a great job of matching compatible businesses near each other. There is definitely an artistic feeling to the place."

"This is an evolving project that is constantly improving," Antenora says. "Penn Field will continue to be a historical landmark as well as an indicator of Austin's future."

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