



IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK THE PENN FIELD RENOVATION PROJECT

By Autumn Rhea

Over the past ninety years, Penn Field's walls have echoed with various industries, ranging from a radio school to a fireplace manufacturer. Although it has housed several businesses, it remains solidly grounded as an Austin landmark. Today's Penn Field was created with modern issues in mind, including recycling, adaptive re-use and sustainable design.

The last building occupants left Penn Field (named after a military cadet called Eugene Penn, an Austin native, killed in 1918 while on a training flight in Italy) in 1996, providing an opportunity to transform this over 200,000 square-foot facility again.

In 1999, The Southwest Strategies Group became interested in renovation possibilities and Michael Antenora of Antenora Architects was chosen for the project. "I wanted to meld history with materials," said Antenora. "We were able to re-use so much of what already existed, while bringing the facility into this decade. Penn Field is very representative of where Austin has been and where it is going."

"Austin is not recognized for its historical structures. Buildings explain a city's past and really speaks of its experiences," said Antenora. "Much of Austin's buildings were driven by economics and demographics rather than aesthetic style. This was our chance to preserve history while still creating a functional structure. Many people don't realize that a building talks to the community. It's more than mortar and bricks."

John Rosato of The Southwest Strategies Group described some of the other projects that he and his partners have completed in Austin. "There are six of us involved with this particular renovation," he said. "Peter Barlin, Daniel Roth, Abe Zimmerman, Stan Biderman, Rob Zippincott and myself. We are strong believers in adaptive re-use and sustainable architecture and this particular project testifies to that fact. Some other projects we've completed include the Sayers Market on 5th Street, The San Jose Hotel, the Grove Drug building and Guero's restaurant."



The project began in 2000 and is 98 percent complete. “Economically speaking, it is usually cheaper to tear down a building, rather than struggle to get it up to transportation, zoning and fire code standards,” said Antenora. “Luckily we were able to create a viable space that was useable and still unique and within the budget. The results have really exceeded all of our expectations.”

The abandoned buildings were badly neglected, with caved roofs, failing foundation, broken windows and trees growing wildly through cement cracks. Besides the obvious cosmetic issues, there were other design considerations, including developing a vehicular pattern that would also cater to pedestrians, making the facility handicap accessible and keeping the style open enough so that renting to retail, office, restaurants and other types of tenants would be possible.

Antenora explained how his team researched important regional aspects for the development. “On the west side of the campus, there are several hackberry and chinaberry trees that are normally considered “trash trees,” he said. “However, these trees provide vital shade and we opted to keep them. We also decided to maintain several bamboo chutes, because they offer a visual buffer. Other environmental issues we studied include the heat, wind, soil and foliage. All of these elements contribute to the overall success of a building more than you would expect.”

Throughout the renovation process, adaptive re-use and sustainable design were constantly discussed. Antenora defined the two types of sustainable design. “The two hallmarks of sustainable design are passive and direct,” he said. “When materials are recycled, but are brought over from somewhere else, this is passive re-use, because energy is required in order to transport the materials to the site. When local materials are re-used or fabricated, this is direct sustainable design. We directly re-used a large portion of materials that was already there, including wood, steel frames and bricks. The only new material that was introduced was aluminum storefront. The result was a mixture of steel and rock that incorporated a truly eclectic style.”



“I am a huge advocate for recycling building materials,” he said. “I frequent the Habitat for Humanity’s Restore and have been known to dumpster dive to save perfectly useable materials for projects. People don’t realize what they are carelessly tossing away.”

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 in turn allowed us to reduce the electricity load requirement,” said Antenora. “We managed to create a place that doesn’t require excessive utilities, that recycles its grey water and makes use of its natural light.”

The Penn Field project did offer some challenges. “Because the developers were also the general contractors, they were directly involved in the process every step along the way,” said Antenora. “These is a very savvy group of people who care about Austin and they did their homework. I had to explain my reasons for choosing certain materials and be ready to defend those reasons. Many architects see constraints as a limitation. I see them as one less piece of the puzzle that I have to worry about and I can spend my mental energy on other problems. It all boils down to trust and once they felt comfortable with my decisions, everyone was well served.”

The renovation of a project of this size entails several elements, including a master plan, as well as urban, interior, landscape and graphic design. “A truly successful urban plan contains an entry, a path and a place to get to – it’s an overlay of all three,” said Antenora. “They are not all obvious and that’s the secret. Depending on whether you visit Penn Field in the morning, at noon or at night, you will have an entirely different experience than someone else. We strived to use light and shadow and subtly create individual illusions.”

Penn Field is 85 percent leased, according to broker John Rosato. “Even though it’s located off of the beaten path, we are able to house a variety of businesses, like Ruta Maya. Clear Channel Communications, Architerra and several others.” He said. “I think we have been able to beat the 23 percent real estate vacancy the city of Austin is currently experiencing, because Penn Field offers quality as well as personality during a bad market. It was fortunate that the restoration of Congress Avenue was completed at the same time we opened our doors. This facility is centrally located and offers more than normal office spaces.”

Antenora explained the benefits of sustainable architecture. “Beside the obvious environmental perks this type of architecture offers, there are important economic advantages as well,” he said. “Since we are in an down turned economy, it’s sometimes better to be a clever re-modeler and learn how to add more square footage without altering the structure’s foundation. Often, it costs less and energy is saved in the process. Adaptive re-use is a very valuable tool during these economic conditions.”

Now, as always, Penn Field's walls echo with innovation, intellectual pioneers and the entrepreneurial spirit that rings true of Austin, Texas.

To learn more about Penn Field, go to <http://www.swsg.com> or call John Rosato at 512.458.8153.

Developer – Southwest Strategy Group

Architect – Antenora Architects

Landscaping - Winteroad and Associates

Structural engineers – Structures and Architectural Engineers Collaborative

Mechanical engineers – Denmon Engineering of Texas

Electrical engineers – Power Quality Engineers

Interior design – Prospecta – Dineen Burger