

A Study of the Studies: Themes and Recommendations
for a Vibrant and Sustainable
Torpedo Factory Art Center

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Appendix 1: Index of Included Studies, Reports, and Plans

Introduction

Founded in 1974, the Torpedo Factory Art Center (TFAC) is an international model in creative placemaking and a core part of the identity of Alexandria, Virginia. Much has changed in the physical and artistic context of the TFAC over the last 40 years and the time is right to re-imagine the TFAC purpose, mission, and vision for the coming decades.

“Now the critical question is: how does the Torpedo Factory build upon and honor the legacy of its visionary founders and, at the same time, find a path of renewal and relevancy beyond its current generation of artists.”¹

To address this “critical question”, the City of Alexandria commissioned Chora to review a series of studies, plans, and reports related to the TFAC, including the City’s strategic plans for the development of the waterfront and the promotion of the arts in Alexandria. Together, these studies contain valuable themes, recommendations, and insights to develop that “path of renewal and relevancy” for the TFAC.

Artistic vibrancy and institutional sustainability remain the primary goals in the views of all those committed to the continuing success of the TFAC.

Vibrancy requires an interactive public engagement with the art and artists of TFAC. It calls for an outward-looking commitment for the TFAC as a public destination that animates Alexandria’s waterfront and offers a lively public art program with educational and entertainment opportunities for all ages.

Sustainability requires a close partnership between the public and the private sectors to implement a business model and a financial structure that allows the TFAC to generate revenue, for both artist and public needs and for the building’s upkeep. This private/public partnership puts emphasis on earned income, private and corporate philanthropy and sponsorship, and City support in recognition of the economic impact of the TFAC.

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a detailed history of the TFAC. but rather to evaluate the most relevant themes and recommendations in reports commissioned over the last decade to guide the

¹ The Cultural Planning Group: [Torpedo Factory Art Center: Business Analysis and Recommendations, January 31, 2016.](#)

path forward for the TFAC. Critical stocktaking will throw light on strategic questions regarding the TFAC's continuing role as a magnet for local art and artists, a landmark for Alexandria's waterfront, and a venue for art enjoyment open to regional and visiting audiences.

A review of 14 documents points to six themes of strategic concern.² These six themes and associated core questions are:

1. Providing effective governance for the TFAC:

- a. Who will oversee and steer the organization, ensuring that its distinctive mission, purpose, and vision are clearly articulated and advanced?
- b. Who will ensure the dynamic balance between artists/tenants needs and a vibrant public program?
- c. Who will provide accountability for the finances and fiscal sustainability of the operations of the TFAC?
- d. Who will determine and monitor core strategic directions of the TFAC?
- e. Who will make and enforce legal, ethical, and artistic policy for the TFAC?

2. Improving the management of the TFAC:

- a. How can the TFAC's communication/coordination/decision-making/and priority-setting be streamlined and improved?
- b. How can marketing be more targeted and successful?
- c. What are the essentials needs of artists and art business operations in the TFAC?
- d. How can the relationships among the TFAC tenants and between tenants and management be improved?
- e. What is the appropriate staffing and staff deployment for the TFAC?

3. Creating a distinct and unified vision and mission for the TFAC

- a. How can a coherent vision and mission that represents the whole of the TFAC be developed? How can the TFAC be more than a sum of its parts?
- b. What does the TFAC want to be known and respected for?
- c. What should be the role of the TFAC within Alexandria's waterfront?

² Appendix 1 lists the reports that have been assessed.

- d. Who are the primary stakeholders and target audiences for the TFAC?
 - e. What should be the role of the TFAC for the artists and art community of Alexandria?
 - f. What is the core business of the TFAC as a commercial art center? What new and profitable businesses can be developed?
 - g. How can the TFAC become a vibrant cultural asset for Virginia--and a financially sustainable organization?
- 4. Developing a sustainable financial model, plan, and operation for the TFAC**
- a. What is the economic impact of the TFAC?
 - b. How can that impact be increased while still achieving the TFAC's purpose and mission?
 - c. What does a sustainable business model for the TFAC look like?
 - d. What new sources of earned or other revenues are available to the TFAC?
 - e. How can the TFAC manage capital maintenance and improvements?
 - f. What is the fundraising potential for TFAC?
 - g. How can the TFAC increase revenues by offering public programs?
- 5. Forging a new relationship with the City of Alexandria**
- a. What is the ideal role for the City to play for the TFAC?
 - b. What vision and expectations does the city have for the TFAC?
 - c. How does the TFAC's purpose and mission align with City's art, waterfront development, and strategic plans?
 - d. What financial role should the City play in sustaining the TFAC?
 - e. How can the TFAC better serve and expand its audiences?
- 6. Preserving and Enlivening the Physical Structure**
- a. How can the City and the TFAC in cooperation maintain and upgrade the TFAC building?
 - b. What building alterations can serve the new vision and mission for the TFAC? How can the building itself be an artistic asset?
 - c. How can the TFAC building contribute to the enlivening and animation of the waterfront?

The remainder of this report will delve deeper into these six themes and associated strategic questions. The objective is eminently pragmatic: distill key recommendations and point to practical steps that the City of Alexandria should consider as the TFAC starts off on a new trajectory.

Theme 1: Providing Effective Governance for the TFAC

Situation Analysis:

Sound governance involves a clear location of authority. Lack of clarity about where authority at the TFAC lies is, by contrast, a persistent theme in several of the management reports reviewed.³ An urgent need is, therefore, to address a perceived or real power vacuum by determining without ambiguity who will provide accountability and oversight of the TFAC, and enforce approved policies and practices, be they legal, financial, or operational. The new governing body must be future-oriented and ensure the long-term sustainability of the TFAC and compliance with its vision and mission.

“...the Torpedo Factory is a valuable public asset which for many years has been governed by a cooperative association of internal volunteers with limited management experience. For the art center to survive and thrive, future sustainability requires greater support and participation by the City. It needs the input of external stakeholders as active partners in governance and continuous improvement. With this support, the artists that work in the Torpedo Factory will have a greater opportunity to focus on their core strengths: the creation and promotion of fine visual art.”⁴

A key strategic concern over the last decade and through many of the reviewed studies and reports is encapsulated in this quote. The TFAA artists feel they have performed admirably in sustaining the TFAC as a commercial venture in a visual arts marketplace (as a for-profit institution).⁵ Critics felt instead that the artists had strayed out of their area of expertise and that the TFAC was underperforming as both a public attraction and as an art asset.

A variety of governance styles have been tried, but none could reach consensus on a consolidated vision, mission, or sustainable financial model that included some cost-sharing for the upkeep and

³ Appendix 1: #'s 2, 6, 7, 8

⁴ Appendix 1, 2010, #2, p. i

⁵ Appendix 1. 2016, # 6, p 1

operation of the City-owned building. Special interest groups and their representatives on various Board structures created factions that undermined smooth governance over policy, financial, and programmatic decisions. An “atmosphere of distrust” among the key stakeholders has been noted in several of the studies reviewed.

As a result of this persistent disfunction, the City eventually lost confidence in continuing to experiment with novel Board structures and decided to allow the TFAC lease to lapse. In 2016 the City assumed full control over the day-to-day operations of the TFAC.

The City feels confident the Office of the Arts has now the expertise and experienced staff capable of successfully operating the TFAC into the future.

Recommendations:

- *Continue the City’s management of the TFAC for the immediate future.* Introducing yet another governance model at this time would be disruptive and face the same potential for failure as previous governance initiatives.
- *Re-assess the City’s management role after 5 years.* The increased accountability of a City managed entity could become a liability over time. Accountability for public funds can impact effectiveness of operations. Acquisitions regulations, for instance, provide high public funds accountability, but can also be overly burdensome. More broadly, it is challenging to operate an income-earning, commercial business within the confines of government procedures and regulations. If inefficiency threatens the viability of operations, it would be appropriate for the City to consider not-for-profit governance alternatives. It is critical that *any* governance structure be independent of the special interest groups associated with past governance difficulties.
- *Build trust through open management policies and practices.* It will take some time for the tenants and art community to trust the intentions of the City and fully accept the City’s authority over the TFAC. Financial commitment, improvements to facilities, successful pilot programs, sound management communication, coordination, decision-making and priority-

setting, together with clarity of purpose, mission, and vision will go a long way toward building a trusting relationship.⁶

- *Strengthen or recreate an effective TFAC Friends Organization.* City governance of the TFAC could hamper fundraising. Donors tend not to give to government entities as they fear their donations will merely compensate for (or even reduce) the City's commitment. A wholly dedicated foundation can provide a conduit for private funding that directly supports program initiatives. A variety of community groups have stepped up to suggest solutions for the future of the TFAC as a beloved local institution.⁷ Forming an effective organization of TFAC friends could strengthen fundraising and community support for the TFAC. There is a dedicated cadre of individuals who could sustain a membership program that would both add earned income and support marketing efforts through a membership calendar and newsletter.
- *Create an Arts Advisory Group* to ensure credibility and quality input from artists on decision and policy making. Populate the group with both regional and national experts.

Theme 2: Improving the Management of the TFAC

Situation Analysis:

The management and operational structure of the TFAC evolved into a complex and often incoherent system of competing interest groups with diverse voices claiming authority and accountability for the organization. Clarity of priorities and vision, resource allocation, decision-making, time and task management and communication suffered under an arrangement of shared authority among Board, tenants, and the TFAA.

Some reports recommended a return to the foundational “marketplace framework” of the TFAC. This more commercial approach recommended retaining an outside management firm to operate the TFAC in a more business-like manner, driving sales and profitability.⁸

Despite numerous suggestions for addressing the management issues of the TFAC, all reports agreed the complex, multi-voiced management system was not efficient or able to build consensus around a single

⁶ Appendix 1: #6, p. 21-22.

⁷ Appendix 1: 2016, #7, p. 4

⁸ Appendix 1: #6, 2016, p. 1-2

vision. Regardless of the specific form, the key business/management reports recommended a new consolidated management function.

“By consolidating all of the management functions into one new organization, roles and responsibilities can be aligned with authority and accountability, creating the opportunity for the Torpedo Factory to operate efficiently and effectively, and providing the circumstances for it to thrive.”⁹

As mentioned, before, in 2016 the City of Alexandria’s Office of the Arts assumed authority over the management of the TFAC. This role for the Office of the Arts filled a gap created by the dysfunction of previous management structures and fit squarely the City’s strategic direction for the Office of the Arts.

“An expanded role for the Office of the Arts both internally within City government and externally as a community convener, facilitator, advocate, and policy leader will benefit arts and cultural organizations and the overall cultural development of Alexandria.”¹⁰

The management transition has been bumpy as the tenants and affiliated organizations are adapting to the City’s new authority structure. Permanent staff have successfully migrated into the new team and roles and responsibilities are being clarified. The mechanics of operating the TFAC are being refined, public programs planned, conflicts are resolved reasonably, and operations are becoming better focused on the new goals of institutional vibrancy and sustainability.

“The core strength and business of the Torpedo Factory Art Center is the working studios which provide visitors with opportunities to learn about the making of art and to buy artwork directly from the artists who create the work.”¹¹

With all the focus on governance, power, and authority, many of the studies reviewed appear to have lost sight of the basic business of the TFAC. The primary management duty--and challenge—remains running the studios, enforcing in-house rules and by-laws, encouraging artists to engage the public, and selling art.

⁹ Appendix 1: #7, 2016, p. 19

¹⁰ Appendix 1: # 14, 2018, p.36

¹¹ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 47

At the core of the TFAC management concerns is the status of the current tenants' leaseholds on studio, classroom, and gallery space. The status quo has largely served the interests of these tenants and they are fearful that change may undermine their position. House rules over the past 40 years have favored long-term occupancies of studios. These studios have evolved primarily into sales spaces with only a small portion dedicated to art production. As a result, the vibrancy of the original TFAC concept has weakened since the visitor has less contact with working artists, art processes and art-in-the making. New artists and art forms are disadvantaged by a rigid lease structure, inhibiting the turnover of art and artists.

All parties agree that the "house rules" for determining tenant status, seniority, and public programming requirements need updating. Tenure of leaseholders is a special concern as all desire "...to safeguard against a tenure system that stifles vibrancy, change, and community engagement..."¹² Beyond tenure, several of the studies reviewed found that artist participation in community outreach and engagement, as well as in keeping studios active during peak program hours was declining.¹³

Despite the broad consensus about the need to change of the house rules, the issues of who should effect any change in studio leasing rules remains unresolved. The distrust that has characterized past relationships has fueled the fear that the City is not an appropriate arbiter of artists merit, needs, or status in the future TFAC.

"...the City has assumed control of TFAC's operations and has negotiated some interim leases with individual artists. That is not a tenable or desirable role for the City to undertake..."

Other studies acknowledge the long-established artist jurying system led by the TFAA. The art experience and knowledge of the TFAA, they assert, calls for the TFAA to be at the center of the re-thinking of the house rules.¹⁴ However, the TFAA has a mixed record of enforcing house rules and judging artist performance and productivity over time. The diversity of the artist pool is also an issue.¹⁵

¹² Appendix 1: #6, 2016, p. 45

¹³ Appendix 1: # 6, 2016, p. 5

¹⁴ Appendix 1: #9, 2016, p. 24

¹⁵ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p.50

The complexity of running the TFAC and its history of mismanagement, combined with the progress made by the Office of the Arts in stabilizing operations, have led the City to make its governance role permanent.

“The City is the only organization capable of the level of investment that can ensure that the community’s interests are also considered in any capital improvement investments. Additionally, the City is better suited to meet the goals outlined in the City’s Arts and Culture Master Plan and the Waterfront Small Area Plan and can impact initiatives such as the King Street Corridor Initiative and Old Town North Arts and Culture District. Similar to the City’s initial investments, the City should continue to invest in the Art Center as a model of placemaking and civic improvement.

Based on the City staff’s demonstrated ability to manage the operations of the Art Center effectively, the desire of working with the arts community both inside and outside of the building to enhance the experience of visitors and the tenants, and the City’s unique ability to provide capital funding to meet the needs of the facility, staff is recommending that the City assume a long-term governance responsibility for the Torpedo Factory Art Center and continue to maintain the Art Center’s unique brand identity.”¹⁶

Aligning the City’s TFAC management (including artist selection and dismissal, public programming, and capital investment) with a clear statement of purpose and vision for the TFAC as a whole will be critical to creating a vibrant and sustainable organization for the period ahead.

Recommendations:

- *The City must sustain its management and leadership.* This includes taking charge of all management functions. Special focus must be on internal communication and conflict resolution, on decision-making and priority-setting, and on the articulation and professionalization of policies and practices. After 5 years, the City can re-assess its role with the TFAC.
- *Elaborate a three- year strategic plan including a revised mission, vision, statement of purpose, core strategic directions and measurable milestones toward vibrancy and sustainability.* At the end of this strategic plan, the City can assess its continuing role in the TFAC.

¹⁶ Appendix 1: #15, 2017, p. 2

- *The shift to a more outward-oriented organization must include a revision of the House Rules. That revision must ensure the participation in public programs of tenant artists, shorter-term leases, broader definition of art and artists to diversify product and participants roster, a larger studio art production space and activity, and greater opportunities for artists-in-residence and guest-artist studios. In this transition phase, the City should control the revision process, seeking input, but not authorization, from outside partners.*
- *Construct a revised jurying system that meets art quality and objectivity standards but includes a diversity of art forms, practices, and media.*
- *Revise the table of organization and staffing to align it with the new vision and core strategic directions.*
- *Professionalize marketing and public program planning and implementation.*
- *Design and execute a staff management training and professional development program.*
- *Design and execute an annual performance evaluation program for staff and tenant artists.*

Theme 3: Creating a Distinct and Unified Vision, Purpose, and Mission for the TFAC

Situation Analysis:

The foundations of a successful business are a clear sense of purpose, a cohesive, unified, and compelling vision, and a long-term mission. The complexity of the TFAC and the diversity of interests and interest groups at play have prevented those foundational elements from coming together.

“There is not clear authority, nor is there a shared mission and vision...efforts to craft a shared vision were abandoned because of the level of contentiousness. Planning participants could not come to agreement on purpose.”¹⁷

Persistent contentiousness among the special interest groups involved in the TFAC has deterred progress and ensconced the status quo as the fallback option.

¹⁷ Appendix 1: #7, 2016, p. 20.

While there is a common sense of passion, energy, and commitment to the TFAC, participating groups--from the TFAA, to the Art League, Friends Groups, and City of Alexandria--have their separate expectations and definitions of what success looks like, what the TFAC should be known and respected for, and what problem the TFAC solves for its community and internal and external stakeholders. Several business and management studies recommended an independent board to govern the TFAC. The responsibility for producing enabling vision, mission, and purpose documents was delegated to that independent board which, however, was not able to reach consensus on these core documents.¹⁸

As the City has now assumed that very same governance role, it also assumes responsibility for delivering and approving these three critical documents (vision mission and statement of purpose). A forthright visionary boldness will be required to overcome the inertia and contentiousness endemic to the TFAC's decision-making and priority-setting of the past. It is a time to locate authority clearly, make decisions, take risks, advance, and lead the TFAC. The current situation is not tenable and will lead to stagnation, not vibrancy and sustainability.

Several of the existing studies point out that the TFAC has evolved into a more inward-looking organization¹⁹ without a clear "...programming structure that serves the broader community."²⁰

These studies indicate that the TFAC primarily served its tenants: the public service largely responded to drop-in visitors to studios-- that have evolved into often shuttered showrooms for existing artwork rather than active studio spaces. Further, "community outreach" for tenant artists was defined as bi-annual participation in "community initiatives or programs", a long shot from its intended definition²¹

Vibrancy suggests interactivity, engagement, fun, diversity, and reaching out to serve new audiences. To be a vibrant and sustainable organization the TFAC must broaden the community it serves, reach out to diverse publics, create attractive new programs that entertain and educate a wide range of audiences, from senior citizens to toddlers.

¹⁸ Appendix 1: #9, 2016, p. 7

¹⁹ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. ii

²⁰ Appendix 1: #7, 2016, p. 3.

²¹ Appendix 1: #6, 2016, p. 44

Several studies were specific about the need to transform the first floor of the TFAC building into a public attraction and a steppingstone to the untapped dynamism of the waterfront.

“Our plan calls for fully realizing the potential of this space (first floor) by planning and curating it with an impresario eye as a space for innovative arts programs (large-scale and pop-up) to increase visitation, generate return visits, create media buzz, activate the waterfront and reinforce Alexandria’s position as a must-visit art destination. A re-envisioned art center starts here—on the ground floor.”²²

In many ways, this vision of the TFAC as a Public Square for the Arts reflects the evolution of its surrounding neighborhood from a decaying industrial waterfront into a dynamic commercial and cultural attraction. The strategic question is: How to transform the TFAC to better integrate it with its new urban context without losing its original purpose of providing subsidized studio space to stimulate art activities and appreciation.

Recommendations:

- *As part of a 3- year strategic plan, the City should conduct a stakeholders’ planning workshop to inform, but not author, a new statement of purpose, a new vision, a new mission for the TFAC and identify core strategic directions.*
- *Initiate a series of programs that reflect and serve a broader art community and that demonstrates the TFAC’s commitment to embrace a more diverse public.*
- *Re-think the vision for the entire first floor to make it the “showroom” for the purpose and products of TFAC, including:*
 - A 2,000 square foot gallery and upgrades for other gallery spaces
 - An interactive Make-IT discovery space for families
 - Expand food services
 - Art studios for visiting artists or commissioned work with active on-going art-in-progress demonstration areas
 - Performance spaces
 - A design studio
 - An art/technology studio

²² Appendix 1: #8, 2016, p. 2

Theme 4: Developing a Sustainable Financial Model, Plan, and Operation for the TFAC

Situation Analysis:

The original financial model of the TFAC promised to transform an aging and unoccupied industrial building into a suite of subsidized artist studios to encourage regional art and create a marketplace for the works of regional artists. In return, the artists would invite visitors into their studios and provide a unique behind-the-scenes experience of artmaking. In addition, the Art League provided popular art classes.

On the strength of this vision, the TFAC became a local icon and a national model. The tenants themselves held sway over financial policy and practice, including lease terms and artist selection.

As with many urban revival projects involving art and artists, the actual hard costs of creating the TFAC opportunity were deferred in order to launch and sustain the creative project. Eventually, however, those costs (including deferred maintenance and opportunity costs to the City) become increasingly problematic. In addition, as economic development occurs nearby, partially because of the success of the TFAC, the property and location became more and more valuable to the City in the context of long-term plans for the waterfront.

The TFAC financial model covered most direct costs of operating its programs largely because of the rental income from the 80, or so, subsidized studios. The TFAC normally operated in the black.

However, the unaccounted-for costs must now be incurred by the City. In addition, the value proposition has changed significantly due to the economic potential and development of the waterfront. The opportunity costs of a 76,000 square foot building amid a rapidly developing waterfront are of greater concern nowadays than when the original concept of the TFAC was developed.

While the City remains committed to the concept of a public art center at the heart of the waterfront, a new financial model is required that can promise sustainability of the TFAC while also monetizing some of the values inherent to its premier location.

Several studies reviewed were explicitly made to explore this new financial model for the TFAC,²³ each with particular strengths and weaknesses.

Charting a New Course: Steering the Torpedo Factory Art Center Towards a Sustainable Future (August 2016) proposes a TFAC with a business structure like conventional art centers. Operated by a private management firm with an independent 11 member TFAC board, this plan's annual operating fund would include earned income from events, individual and alumni memberships, corporate sponsorships and philanthropy. Capital funds would be generated through a campaign where the City matched private gifts. However, the proposed Board and groups in control of programming would be composed of the same mix of representatives that stymied consensus building and priority-setting in the past. The capital campaign would be difficult as donors are routinely reluctant to give to government-owned entities, notwithstanding the matching condition. Even if the building were upgraded to 2019 standards, a deferred capital account would be required annually for maintenance and future capital expenses. Given the full costs of operating the TFAC as a "vibrant marketplace" for art sales, industry data would not support the assumption that an art center of this size would be sustainable with the mix of earned and donor support suggested and the rental income from the studios. The idea that the status quo could be sustained via a capital campaign and modest program changes does seem viable as a business plan.

Torpedo Factory Art Center: Business Analysis and Recommendations (January 2016) offers an entirely different business direction for the TFAC. While acknowledging that there are elements of the status quo that should be preserved, this report calls for a radical change in direction.

*"The primary missing element is a bold, compelling, and shared vision for the future that excites stakeholders that will lead to renewal. This compelling vision is necessary to guide all decision-making and its impact on the use of resources."*²⁴

To move beyond the "stasis and competing internecine agendas", the TFAC must create a compelling new vision and mission, and a new organizational and managerial structure to realize that vision. This study further calls for the TFAC to become more relevant to the community with a new commitment to significant public programs. The TFAC should challenge its current roster of artists and dysfunctional leasing practices and become an "...incubator for the most promising young artists in the DC

²³ Appendix 1: #'s 5,6,7.

²⁴ Appendix 1: #7, 2019, p. 6

metropolitan region. More interactive and performance art, art housed in different media, having the skin of the building alive...More educational outreach and demonstrations.”²⁵

The study asserts that the inertia and authority delegation of the status quo have caused the TFAC to lag both in the art it presents and the way it is adapting to the rapid changes in its physical environment on the waterfront of Alexandria.

The first floor is projected to become a “vibrant, beautiful, and inspiring Great Hall”; a public art square with larger and bolder gallery spaces and room for art commissions and installations. The entire first floor would be re-oriented to the waterfront side with public attractions and services as the theme. In short, this study recommends the TFAC to transform itself from an inward-looking space serving the tenants, to an outward looking-organization serving the community.

Neither “business plan” outlined above presents financial studies, detailed projections, or models to analyze profit and loss for the continuing TFAC. However, without clarity of mission, vision, strategic directions, governance, physical plant modifications, and programs, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to produce a convincing financial analysis. With the City now operating the building, the possibility of creating that clarity and producing a credible business model and plan is realistic.

Recommendations:

- *Commission the creation of a realistic, but challenging, business model, with associated financial plan and performance indicators.* The business model should include a demand analysis (visitor forecast), a clear and compelling mission/vision, a sample of annual programs, a City run governance and management structure, the organizational structure and staffing required to perform the museum’s mission, the estimated revenues it can expect to raise from admissions, membership, café and store, rentals and educational ventures, and a pro-forma operating budget that the TFAC will require to operate effectively. The business plan should also identify strategies and tactics to close any gap between revenues and expenses through private support, partnerships and additional public support. The objective is to throw light on the operational realities and challenges the new TFAC will face.

²⁵ Appendix1: #7 2016, p. 9

- *Produce a management structure, policies, procedures, and practices to execute the strategic plan and business plan.*

Theme 5: Forging a New Relationship to the City of Alexandria

Situation Analysis:

In 2016, the City of Alexandria allowed the TFAC lease to expire and took over day-to-day operations, including the management of the individual studios and organization leases. This assumption of control has provided stability, short-term direction, and professionalism in the management procedures and practices of the TFAC. By making managerial control a long-term decision, the City is now positioned to be the leader in shaping the future of the TFAC.

The City remains committed to the concept of the TFAC as an anchor for the arts on the waterfront and it is eager to integrate the TFAC's purpose and programs into the larger City plans for the waterfront/Old Town development, tourism, and the arts in Alexandria.

Having reviewed all previous studies of the TFAC, the City concluded that the missing voice was that of the residents and users of the TFAC. A community engagement process was thus kicked started.²⁶

In many ways, the conclusions and recommendations in the *Torpedo Factory Art Center Community Engagement Report (2017)* echo the calls of earlier studies for clarifying the mission and purpose of the TFAC. This includes “curating the visitor experience” through improved interpretive programming, highlighting the history of the building, creating engaging interactive experiences, and transforming the first floor into an exciting public arts space. Again, this report called for a more inclusive public arts attraction with programs designed for adults interested in arts, but also families, children, and tourists. While meeting the artists and seeing art in the making would still be a mainstay, these tenant-based initiatives would be complemented by community relevant outreach programs. As with all other reports reviewed here, shuttered studios were flagged as a negative, as was the lack of art demonstrations and active studios.

²⁶ Appendix 1: #12, 2016

The Impact of the Torpedo Factory Art Center on the City of Alexandria's Economy reaches similar conclusions.

*"The challenge going forward is how best to maximize this asset to the benefit of the City's economic base... The Torpedo Factory is the City's most important single tourist attraction. To achieve the Torpedo Factory's full potential as a magnet for out-of-town visitors, it must become more extroverted in its operations. This may be achieved through improved management and programming of its public spaces, initiating joint activities with other tourist-serving organizations in hosting events outside the Torpedo Factory building on adjacent deck space and elsewhere in the City, and by more effectively publicizing the featured events, exhibitions, educational functions and other activities sponsored at the Torpedo Factory to broaden its market and increase its capture rate."*²⁷

Weaving art and history together are at the heart of the City's waterfront development plan. The iconic character of the TFAC makes it an anchor for that theme. As the waterfront regains its status as the historic "front door" of the City, the character and role of the TFAC will evolve. Food venues, celebration, strolling, tourism, and ²⁸shopping will dominate the area. The TFAC will need to complement those activities by becoming a more open public space, actively programming for tourists, shoppers, diners, families, and special events. An expanded audience orientation will require new forms of services, programs, marketing, management, and collaboration. The more passive programming of open studios, small galleries, minimal history interpretation, and modest food spaces will have to shift to a more proactive public attraction role, especially on the first floor.

Achieving equity, inclusion, and access for arts, culture and creative endeavors is one of the goals for the City of Alexandria.

"Arts, culture, and creativity are among a community's most powerful assets. They distinguish each community and allow residents to better understand and celebrate the uniqueness of their lives. Arts, culture, and creativity are a competitive tool, strengthening many elements of civic life, including the

²⁷ Appendix 1: #10, 2017, p.17

²⁸ Appendix 1: #11, 2017, p.8

economy, workforce development, education, youth development, neighborhood development, redevelopment, sustainability, and cultural equity.”²⁹

The TFAC is a prime venue to deliver on these social aspirations. Diversity among the TFAC art tenants is a natural starting point. It is important, especially for young, aspiring artists to see artists that look like them being active and successful in the TFAC. Multi-cultural arts programs of all sorts need to be a staple for the TFAC as a symbol of Alexandrian pride in, and commitment to, equity, inclusion, and diversity in the arts.

History is a key attraction for the City of Alexandria, and Old Town is one of the nation’s most important historic districts. The Torpedo Factory is part of the historic fabric of Old Town and the waterfront. A substantial exhibition on the history of the Torpedo Factory and its role in two world wars would begin integrating the Torpedo Factory with its historic context and neighborhood. Blending the past and the modern, connecting the TFAC and its historic neighbors is a distinctive opportunity consistent with the City’s plans for developing the waterfront. Restoring the building would be part of the City’s strategic commitment to restore the landmark that it owns. That restoration could be a platform to integrate history, design, and architecture into the program of the TFAC.

Recommendations:

- *Form a Waterfront Arts Alliance to integrate history, culture, and commercial interests and initiatives based on the City’s Waterfront Small Area Plan, Torpedo Factory Community Engagement Report and Implementation Plan for Alexandria’s Public Art Policy.*
- *Install a significant Torpedo Factory exhibition in the facility.*
- *Produce an architectural and program plan to transform the first floor into a Great Hall and public attraction for the waterfront.*
- *Develop pilot “extroverted” public art education programs along with an effective marketing program.*
- *Develop activities and make-it spaces specifically for families and children.*
- *Commission a tourism development plan for the waterfront and the TFAC.*
- *Produce TFAC “pop-up” events across the community.*

²⁹ Appendix 1: #11, 2017, p. 7

- *Diversify the artist pool to better represent the community.*
- *Develop an artist in residence program for mid-career artists in a dedicated studio.*
- *Add food, music, performance, and dancing as regular features of the TFAC (à la First Fridays at the Brooklyn Museum, or the Art Rocks program at the Birmingham Museum of Art) with an emphasis on attracting younger audiences.*

Theme 6: Enhancing and Enlivening the Physical Structure

Situation Analysis:

Although most of the reports under review here focused on governance, and programmatic and financial issues, the building is invariably alluded to as another major element in the future of the TFAC. It is recognized that the past financial success of the TFAC was in the context of a rent-free City-owned facility with capital and maintenance costs borne by the City. Without that significant subsidy, the TFAC could not have operated without recurrent financial losses. The capital improvement needs are now at a critical junction, since the building has received a “D” rating--a dangerous situation for a building hosting 500,000 annual visitors.

As the TFAC develops its mission, vision, and strategic plans under City’s guidance, the renovation of the building should be carried out with the intention of supporting those strategic plans and directions.

As stated previously in this report, the first floor is a critical area recommended for upgrading. Once revamped, it will perform a more inclusive programming and event function while also serving the needs of the waterfront development. If funding necessitates a phased approach, this first-floor renovation could be the first phase of physical upgrades, with the upper floors continuing to function primarily as studios offices, and classrooms. While bringing the whole building up to code, major alterations in purpose and function could be centered on the first floor, addressing the immediate need to transform the TFAC into a more inviting public attraction.

Many of the reports reviewed recommended enlivening the exterior of the building, re-orienting the entrance to the waterfront side, and creating a more iconic art look-and-feel. The “skin” of the building could be animated to deliver the innovative and creative potential of a space dedicated to the arts.

Projections on the building along with other artistic expressions were suggested to establish the TFAC as a distinctive art place and enliven the waterfront at the same time.

Recommendations:

Celebrate the TFAC as an essential part of the Alexandria waterfront experience.

- Enhance the Alexandria waterfront experience through events and programs at the TFAC.³⁰
- Celebrate the building through physical art that wraps the building or visual art projections onto the building facades.³¹
- Allow the TFAC to extend to the outdoors through exhibits and art that spill out onto the waterfront.³²
- Clearly delineate the building as a historic and cultural point of interest along the waterfront Art Walk through signage, advertising, and programming.³³
- Commission public art that tells the story of the TFAC.³⁴

Enhance and enliven the TFAC building to make it more inviting and increase visitorship.

- Create clear and welcoming access points by redesigning the entries from Union Street and King Street.³⁵
- Redesign and enlarge the entry from the waterfront side to create make it a primary entry.³⁶
- Create inviting exterior and interior lighting, signage and wayfinding.³⁷
- Allow arts programs and events to spill out onto the waterfront.³⁸
- Integrate a restaurant/café with outside seating on the waterfront side and access from inside the TFAC.³⁹

³⁰ Appendix 1: #9, 2016, p. 7, 8

³¹ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 37; #3, 2012 p. 56; #7, 2016 p. 9

³² Appendix 1: #3, 2012, p. 54; #6, 2016 p. 46

³³ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 37; #3, A5, 2010 p. 30

³⁴ Appendix 1: #3, A5, 2010, p. 30

³⁵ Appendix 1: #3, A5, 2010, p. 31; #3, 2012 p. 56

³⁶ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 35; #7, p. 8-9

³⁷ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 14, 35, 36

³⁸ Appendix 1: #6, 2016, p. 18

³⁹ Appendix 1: #2, 2010 p. 43,

Infuse the TFAC building interior with diverse, active spaces that celebrate art, engage the community, and generate revenue.

- Consolidate all gallery spaces currently in the building to one central gallery at the ground level.⁴⁰
- Provide flex space to accommodate a range of installations and large exhibits.⁴¹
- Create a ground-level maker space.⁴²
- Create space for innovative, collaborative, and immersive arts programs at the ground level that accommodates families.⁴³
- Delineate rentable space at the ground level for programming and events and include the gallery space as part of the event space.⁴⁴ Allow for fee-based non-visual arts programming including immersive theatre.⁴⁵
- Relocate the Archeology Museum to maximize the opportunity for greater foot traffic.⁴⁶
- Relocate the Art League store to the ground floor to allow sales to the public.⁴⁷ Potentially combine it with the gift shop and/or consolidated gallery.
- Create a large 3rd floor rental space with views to the waterfront integrating outdoor event space and art on the roof.⁴⁸

Improve the long-term physical and environmental sustainability the TFAC building.

- Improve visibility of interior spaces from outside the building.⁴⁹
- Address building maintenance issues.⁵⁰
- Renovate the building to better serve its mission and future vision.⁵¹
- Make the building more energy efficient/environmentally sustainable.⁵²

⁴⁰ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. ii, 14, 38, 39

⁴¹ Appendix 1: #7, 2016, p. 9

⁴² Appendix 1: #8, 2016, p. 1

⁴³ Appendix 1: #12, 2017, p. 143

⁴⁴ Appendix 1: #6, 2016, p. 15

⁴⁵ Appendix 1: #6, 2016, p. 35-36

⁴⁶ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 20, 55; #3, 2012 p. 138

⁴⁷ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 39

⁴⁸ Appendix 1: #3, 2012, p. 56

⁴⁹ Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 37

⁵⁰ Appendix 1: #7, 2016, p. 23

⁵¹ Appendix 1: #7, 2016, p. 8-9

⁵² Appendix 1: #2, 2010, p. 62

Further Architectural Considerations

Building improvements will be critical to TFAC's future vibrancy and sustainability. With a more inclusive and public-focused vision, the architecture of the Torpedo Factory will need to be carefully adapted to reflect those ideals and accommodate the programs and amenities that support them. Given the scope of potential improvements, the robust nature of the physical structure, its location within a historic district, and various code developments since its last significant renovation, the potential complexity and cost of modifications must be carefully considered.

Immediately prior to the development of an architectural program, SmithGroup recommends TFAC retain a consultant to conduct a holistic facility assessment following the ASTM E2018-15 standard. As a thorough update to the 2010 MAI report, this assessment will capture deficiencies in physical infrastructure, systems, and latent code issues, describe and assign estimated costs to recommended remedial/upgrade/replacement work, and prioritize that work into immediate, short-term (1-3 years), and long-term (5-10 year) categories based on the respective urgency. The report findings will serve as a critical data point for the future focused TFAC financial models by capturing and quantifying deferred maintenance, while also informing the architectural programming effort where certain interventions could be aligned with components of the building already in need of upgrades.

The architectural recommendations outlined under Theme 6 represent a high-level summary of potential interventions to the physical TFAC structure that should be considered in parallel with future visioning, management and strategic business models. Whether intended to directly enhance the visitor experience through a physical improvement or reconfigure space to accommodate a new amenity or program, each intervention should be understood and prioritized through its respective impact on, or support of, the other 5 themes outlined in this report. Accordingly, as the recommendations contained in themes 1 through 5 are advanced, we recommend an architectural space program be developed concurrently. For example, a more robust food service amenity would likely require a contracted operator to provide input on the service model, kitchen and seating counts, and accommodations for event catering support to properly align the food service program with a viable operational model. All of these operational variables will inform space allocation, configuration and adjacencies.

To supplement the architectural program, conceptual test-fits should be developed to solve for high-level code and systems-related considerations even if full design is deferred to a subsequent phase. For example, new assembly-occupancy event or classroom spaces would need to be checked against current mechanical codes for ventilation requirements, egress capacity of existing stairs and exit doors, and required toilet room fixture counts. Furthermore, it is likely that substantial renovations will trigger other code upgrades to existing conditions even with relatively minor use changes. For example, the existing open circulating stair connecting more than two levels creates an atrium condition that could be complicated by use or occupancy changes, potentially requiring new fire separations at the third level or a smoke exhaust system. It will be critical to understand these other code-related issues to define a realistic roadmap for implementation.

As noted previously, TFAC may elect to undertake architectural and infrastructure changes and upgrades on a phased basis. While inherently more complex to manage, and possibly more costly on a construction-cost basis, phasing would allow for TFAC to implement work in a way that aligns with more modest capital campaigns and cash flow, and avoid displacing artist tenants for a prolonged construction period. The architectural program and conceptual test-fits should be developed to represent a fully-implemented future state for TFAC. With a holistic future state program in place, a phasing plan should be crafted to balance cost, construction logistics, visitor safety, and minimum viable visitor experience (what remains open during each phase). Conceptual costing should be developed to align with the phasing plan, with appropriate escalation factors to match the proposed phase starts and durations.

To provide the conditions for bold change, subsequent planning and design efforts will need to emphasize collaboration around a cohesive vision. Business and operational models will be inseparable from the physical interventions that support them, and less glamorous deferred maintenance upgrades will need to be quantified side-by-side with the new architectural features that will reflect the future face of the TFAC.

Conclusions

This report has reviewed 15 prominent studies that have been commissioned over the last ten years or so to tackle an important challenge for the Alexandria: how to preserve and improve the important role that the TFAC plays for the communities it serves.

The upshot of this review is that important themes can be distilled from the studies: these themes point to the way forward. The stocktaking suggests a variety of operational recommendations that the City of Alexandria should consider.

The list may appear daunting, but now that the City is in firm managerial control of the TFAC there is a welcome opportunity for a radical change of direction that should not be missed.

A bold approach will make a renewed TFAC truly live up to its promises.

Appendix 1: Index of Included Studies, Reports, and Plans

1. **2002** City of Alexandria Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities Strategic Master Plan, 2002 (*by Leon Younger and PROS for the City of Alexandria*)
2. **2010** A Study of the Torpedo Factory Art Center (*Management Analysis, Incorporated*)
3. **2012** Alexandria Waterfront Small Area Plan, February 2012 (*City of Alexandria Planning and Zoning, Adopted by Ordinance No. 4749*)
4. **2014** An Implementation Plan for Alexandria’s Public Art Policy, 2014 (*Todd Bressi, Via Partnership, and Lardner Klein for City of Alexandria Office of the Arts & the Alexandria Commission for the Arts*)
5. **2016** Alexandria Arts and Cultural Master Plan (*Cultural Planning Group for City of Alexandria Office of the Arts*)
6. **2016** Charting a New Course: Steering the Torpedo Factory Art Center Toward a Sustainable Future, 2016 (*KAPTIVATE for the Torpedo Factory Artist Association*)
7. **2016** Torpedo Factory Art Center: Business Analysis and Recommendations, January 31, 2016. (*The Cultural Planning Group for the TFAC Board*)
8. **2016** A Vision for the Torpedo Factory Art Center: Community Members for the Future of the Torpedo Factory, 2016 (*Community Members for the Future of the Torpedo Factory*)
9. **2016** A Discourse of the Recommendations for the Torpedo Factory Art Center, 2016. (*Torpedo Factory Art Center Joint Executive Committee – Torpedo Factory Art Center Board, Torpedo Factory Artist Association, the Art League*)

10. **2017** The Impact of the Torpedo Factory Art Center on the City of Alexandria’s Economy, 2017 (*The Stephen S. Fuller Institute for Research on the Washington Region’s Economic Future, Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, with analytical support from KAPTIVATE for the Torpedo Factory Artist Association*)
11. **2017** City Strategic Plan, 2017-2022 (*Reingold, Inc. for City of Alexandria*)
12. **2017** Torpedo Factory Art Center Community Engagement Report (*City of Alexandria and Alexandria Commission for the Arts Task Force*)
13. **2018** Public Hearing and Consideration of a Governance Recommendation for Torpedo Factory Art Center Vibrancy and Sustainability Plan, November 7, 2018 (*City of Alexandria*)
14. **2018** Alexandria: The New Experience (*The Cultural Planning Group*)
15. **2018** Development of a Vibrancy and Sustainability Plan for the Torpedo Factory Art Center (*City Council Legislative Meeting, November 7, 2018*)