Rethinking Psychiatric Facilities Through Universal Design: The Case of the Strozzi Building at the Buffalo Psychiatric Center

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Introduction

One in five Americans suffer from some form of mental illness. That’s roughly 57.7 million people (National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, n.d.). Many receive treatment through community-based outpatient services. Despite a movement to decentralize psychiatric care in recent decades, there is still a segment of the population that requires inpatient treatment in psychiatric hospitals. As of 2010, there were 399 private and 262 public psychiatric hospitals in operation in the United States treating approximately 10,000 individuals (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Some of the general challenges of designing a therapeutic psychiatric hospital environment include providing for the safety and security of patients, visitors, and staff, ensuring quality daylight, ventilation, and views to nature, and encouraging interactions and encounters between patients and staff.

Focused Interview

A psychiatric nurse with over 25 years of experience in the field was interviewed for this study. The interviewee manages the care of 27 long term patients diagnosed with schizophrenia and other similar psychosis at the Strozzi Building of the Buffalo Psychiatric Center. The interview confirmed the findings from the initial literature review and revealed a number of problems with the design of the Strozzi Building, some of which are illustrated in the photos at right. Some of the major issues are blind spots (a safety and security concern), an overall institutional aesthetic, and very poor lighting (natural and artificial), ventilation, and acoustics. Further research revealed that the Strozzi Building was completed in 1965 and was designed with a capacity of 844 beds (Goody Clancy, 2008). According to the Buffalo Psychiatric Center website, the facility today has a capacity of 188 beds.

Precedent Study

Project Name: Essex County Hospital Center Institute for Mental Health Policy, Research, and Treatment
Location: Cedar Grove, New Jersey
Architect: Cannon Design
Description: This facility is comprised of a series of buildings with specific functions for patient care, organized around the concept of a healing village. A central outdoor courtyard serves as the heart of this facility where patients, visitors, and staff can participate in social, recreational, and educational activities. The primary circulation zone encircles this courtyard and acts as an indoor social rehabilitation mall (Cannon Design, 2014).

Lessons Learned: This project supports a new model of design for psychiatric hospitals that encourages lower-rise construction organized around courtyards, well-lit and ventilated spaces, and more inviting and less institutional interiors.

Views of the contemporary Essex County Hospital Center. From left to right, a model of the complex, a classroom, an entrance, and a library space. Source: http://www.cannondesign.com/projects/project-catalog/institute-for-mental-health-policy-research-and-treatment/

Design Proposal

Based on the research and further analysis of the outdated Strozzi Building, it was determined that an adaptive reuse of the structure was feasible, rather than a total demolition. It is recommended that two vertically adjacent units be combined into one. Additionally, a glass enclosed double height dayroom space should be carved out from the newly combined unit and a balcony constructed on the upper level. Also, the patient rooms should be resized and realigned to include two windows per room and a multi-purpose, open plan therapy space be provided on the newly created upper level, adjacent to the balcony. The nurse’s station should remain in its original location on the lower level and the odd corridor space at the back of the unit, which produces blind spots, should be removed.

Relationship to the Goals of Universal Design

Body Fit & Comfort - The resized and realigned patient rooms satisfy these goals.

Awareness & Understanding - The evidence-based nature of this design satisfies these goals.

Wellness - The improvements to lighting, views, and ventilation satisfy this goal.

Social Integration - The space is designed to encourage interaction between all users.