ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Penn State Hershey Cancer Institute

Payette

Hershey, Pennsylvania

A building's design expresses and supports its client's mission of blending research and treatment.

By Clifford A. Pearson

Health-care facilities typically use isolation as a strategy for dealing with infection control, creating buildings that work as sets of departments closed off from one another. The new Penn State Hershey Cancer Institute, however, emphasizes integration — in terms of both flow and function. Embodying the client's philosophy of "translational medicine," which brings together cancer research and treatment, the 182,000-square-foot building provides a series of indoor and outdoor spaces that encourage interaction — among different parts of the medical community, between patients and doctors, and between patients and their families.

Program

The Penn State Hershey Medical Center hired Payette to expand its existing campus — adding buildings for the Cancer Institute, a children's hospital, and a parking garage — while also adding a new lobby for the general hospital, renovating the emergency department, and rethinking circulation through the sprawling complex. The new buildings needed to work with and respect the great curving structure known as the Crescent, designed by Vincent Kling in the mid-1960s.

Solution

To complement the Crescent, Payette organized the new buildings along a curving line it calls the Arc, completing first the garage, then in July 2009, the Cancer Institute and hospital lobby. Construction is under way now on the children's hospital and is scheduled to be done by the fall of 2012. "Our project shifts the center of gravity to the Arc," says Kevin Sullivan, AIA, one of Payette's principals in charge, and offers a new face for the medical complex.

Lighter and more open than the softly curving concrete Crescent, the steel-frame Cancer Institute reaches out to arriving patients with a large metal-and-wood canopy and generously glazed upper floors sitting above a base clad with granite, limestone, and metal-alloy panels. While the old building has a lovely garden tucked away in its medical-school wing, the new facilities bring this architectural device to the forefront in a series of green courtyards — one for the Cancer Institute, one for the general hospital, and two for the children's hospital. "Embedded gardens are the life force of the project," states Sullivan. "It's our belief that access to nature not only makes for good architecture, but also good health care," he adds.

Movement through the new buildings was critical to the project's design and inspired the architects to envision the main public spaces as an archipelago of curvilinear forms, explains Sullivan. So reception desks, planters, and skylights work as abstract islands, and waves of landscaping ripple through the gardens. The lobbies of the main hospital and Cancer Institute intersect, as will that of the children's hospital when it is done. In the Cancer Institute, the architects carved out a four-story atrium that offers views from one floor to another. Because it serves as a social hub, the architects dubbed it the "beehive."

As part of its mission to break down old barriers, the institute brings together departments that had been on different parts of the campus and mixes offices for researchers with those for clinicians on the top two floors. These floors also combine lab spaces with offices, breaking with tradition. Lounges overlooking the beehive on the top floors encourage all members of the medical community to relax, eat together, and exchange ideas. "We moved from a departmental model to an integrated institute," says Thomas Loughran, the director of the Institute. "We recently put together a major grant proposal," he recalls, "and having everyone talking to each other helped."

On the first two floors, access to daylight enlivens infusion suites and outpatient clinics. In some places, a small glazed room overlooks the garden and offers an attractive space for family members to relax while being close to those being treated.

Commentary

While walking through the Cancer Institute's treatment suites still feels like an institutional trek, connections with outdoor spaces offer critical improvements to the character of the place. The beehive atrium does a good job of bringing daylight and activity to the heart of the building, gathering researchers and clinicians together in its upper-floor lounges and establishing visual ties between doctors and the people they serve. The building's design inspires confidence that such connections can speed the translation of research into treatment.

Completion Date: July 2009

Owner: The Pennsylvania State University

Total construction cost: $92 million

Gross square footage: 182,000 sq.ft.

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