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Evidence based designs once again dominate entries of the annual Healthcare Environment Awards

By Stacy Straczynski

The annual competition, co-sponsored by Contract magazine, The Center for Health Design, HEALTHCARE DESIGN.10, and The Vendome Group, recognizes excellence in healthcare facility design in Acute, Ambulatory, Conceptual, Health and Fitness, Long-Term, and Student categories.

2010 HEALTHCARE ENVIRONMENT AWARD WINNERS

HEALTH AND FITNESS FACILITIES

Winning Project: Central Harlem STD Clinic
Architect: Stephen Yablon Architect PLLC



Photo Credit: Michael Moran

Tensions tend to be high for those seeking testing, treatment, or education at any STD clinic; and according to Scottie Owens, Leaks, deputy commissioner of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), existing embarrassment coupled with an unwelcoming and difficult to navigate design can be the tipping point. And with many of New York's 22 freestanding, community-based free public health clinics existing in early 20th century, historic buildings, presenting communities with a functional and hospitable design can be quite the challenge for the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYCDOHMH) Manhattan-based Stephen Yablon Architect, PLLC (SYA) rose to the challenge by creating the Central Harlem STD Clinic, winner of Contract magazine's 2010 Healthcare Environment Awards, Health & Fitness category winner.

The building in question was the landmark-quality McKim, Mead and White structure in Harlem. While fully functional, NYCDOHMH could not encourage the community to utilize the clinic's services, due to the structure's outdated look and apparent need for repair. SYA was chosen, via New York City's Mayor's Design Excellence Initiative, a program of the city's Department of Design and Construction that selects designers for new public projects based on design excellence and not price, to create an inviting new design for the clinic that would exude calm and lessen the fear and public stigma of those seeking testing, treatment, and education, as well as serve the clinic's needs for many years to come.

The project presented SYA with three challenges related to both building structure and clinic protocol. "With a building lobby and vertical cores in the middle of the floor, it was a challenge to devise a plan that would provide easy patient orientation and efficient staff flow. The multistep patient visit protocol made clear circulation, a main waiting space for orientation within the facility, and carefully planned adjacencies essential," says Stephen Yablon, AIA, LEED AP, Stephen Yablon Architect principal and lead designer. "It was also critical that we successfully address the public agency's stringent maintenance and durability requirements and create a facility that could be easily maintained with limited operating funds."

The space's new layout features two distinct sections: a counseling area and clinical space that include evaluation rooms, counseling offices, and clinical spaces/labs. Linked by an educational and waiting space, which serves as the clinic's core, the City of New York's commitment to provide state-of-the-art medical care and protect the health and well-being of all New Yorkers is expressed.

"The most interesting aspect of the project was the exploration of how the section concept could be designed to express the identity and mission of the client and clinic, serve as an essential orientation device, and create a noninstitutional feeling that is not typical of most public facilities. Our favorite part was the creation of the main waiting space to make it simultaneously reassuring and exhilarating," Yablon says.

Architectural inclusions—such as curved ceiling panels, epoxy-coated walls, porcelain tiles, and bamboo—warm the space and give the interior a modern but reassuring sentiment; while a focal wall is faced with resin panels adorned with Ithemba, a traditional, beaded mesh made by African women who have been affected by HIV and AIDS. To create a soothing effect, soft, indirect lighting was used to warm the space by mimicking natural light, which the glossy, resin on the waiting room walls subtly reflects to offset the metal, industrial-style finishes and white-hued inclusions. Additionally, high recycled content materials, low-VOC coatings, and HVAC systems contribute to the office's sustainable qualities and compliance with NYC DDC High Performance Guidelines.

Looking back, Yablon wouldn't change much of the design. "We would explore integrating lighting and signage into the epoxy-coated walls," he says, noting that he plans to do so on the firm's next project.