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STEPHEN YABLON ARCHITECT



Clean Bill of Health

Stephen Yablon Architect finds the right treatment for New York's ailing ambulatory-care clinics
By Richard Staub

Institutional-looking they're not. Light-filled, welcoming, and design-forward? Absolutely. The two ambulatory-care clinics designed by Stephen Yablon Architect (SYA) for New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) turn a new leaf for the city's healthcare facilities. And along with these comes another achievement: the recently completed "Design Guidelines for Ambulatory Health Care Clinics," prepared by an SYA-led team with the NYC Department of Design and Construction (DDC) and DOHMH to help other architects develop functional, attractive clinics.

An important booster for the clinics and guidelines is DOHMH Deputy Commissioner for Administration Scottie Owings-Leaks, who oversees the development and maintenance of the agency's facilities. Deputy commissioner for eight years, Owings-Leaks had previously worked in the field for 22, and got to know just how inhospitable and confusing the clinics could be.

While most of the DOHMH's ambulatory clinic facilities date from the 1930s, the department's role in disease prevention began with its founding in 1866 to stem a great outbreak of cholera and, after that, typhus, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and other epidemics. At the turn of the last century, the DOHMH combated the very high child mortality rate and, in later decades, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

"These clinics perform an important role in treating people with communicable diseases," says Owings-Leaks. "But when the infected person is embarrassed by an STD or other infection and is reluctant to seek help, it doesn't help if the clinic feels unwelcoming and is difficult to navigate."

The first of the two clinics SYA designed under the DDC's Design and Construction Excellence program was the Central Harlem STD Clinic. While Stephen Yablon, AIA, relished the idea of working in the McKim, Mead & White building – the clinic occupies the ground floor – he also understood the challenges. One was to get patients through the building's main lobby to the clinic entrance at the far side. To do that, he moved the reception desk to one side so that people enter-



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Above: A section of the Chelsea Health Center illustrates how the renovation connects the clinic to the park with a new glass-enclosed stair, undulating wood ceilings, and perimeter "park walls" Top left: Waiting rooms and circulation in the center have park views and "park walls" that evoke the surrounding sycamore trees Top right: Natural shapes and materials and high-gloss white walls in the lobby express the connection between nature, health, and the advanced care offered there

ing the lobby could see directly across to the glass doors of the clinic entrance. His second task was to soften the clinic environment, bring in natural light, and introduce an easy-to-follow floor plan.

The skill with which SYA resolved those challenges led DDC to award the firm a second clinic, the Chelsea District Health Center. As with Harlem, outlining the project's requirements was one of SYA's first steps. But, as Owings-Leaks realized at the project's start, the basic exam room in doctors' offices doesn't change much in size, materials, and equipment. Indeed, the STD, chest, immunization, dental, and employee health clinics, along with support spaces found at all 10 DOHMH ambulatory clinics, have the same general requirements to comply with standards set in N.Y. State Department of Health Article 28. So DOHMH and DDC commissioned a team led by SYA to come up with design standards applicable to all DOHMH ambulatory clinics. "Whenever there's a repeat typology, it pays to learn from experience," says DDC Commissioner David Burney, FAIA, "which we discovered in creating guidelines for the city's libraries and firehouses. The architect gets it right the first time, and there's a savings in the number of change orders."

The team, which included medical planning consultant James C. Snyder, AIA, and the engineering firm Ambrosino, DePinto & Schmieder, worked closely with the DOHMH and DDC. The guidelines outline the recommended patient flow, adjacencies, room size, equipment, security, and furnishings as well as such "specialties" as bulletin boards, coat hooks, and paper towel dispensers. And one section covers material performance qualities and mechanical system



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Left: Natural and high-tech materials interlock in the waiting/education area to evoke warmth and the state-of-the-art medical care provided at the clinic
Below: The Central Harlem Health Center lobby features a luminous oval ceiling set within a bamboo and tile space to create a welcoming entry experience

standards, with New York City's sustainability goals and ADA compliance informing all of the recommendations.

"While developing these guidelines, we put ourselves in the place of an architect or engineer who would come to this building type for the first time," says Yablon. "So we described, for example, the qualities the casework and countertop materials should have, but never specified a particular material. We wanted to be as thorough as possible without telling other designers how to do it."

The clinic project in Chelsea gave SYA the chance to test how successful they'd been. The three-story Art Deco brick building, set in Chelsea Park on Ninth Avenue and 28th Street, called for a gut renovation, and SYA is now just concluding the construction document phase. As with the Harlem STD clinic, Yablon first addressed the entry and plan, but this time the park's presence provided additional inspi-

ration. "We felt that bringing nature indoors would be a healing gesture, so we were always trying to strengthen that link."

Circulation begins with the lobby and a welcoming kidney-shaped reception desk where staff can orient visitors. Large glass doors behind the desk lead to a new main stair and patient areas, whose perimeter windows offer generous views of the park. The straightforward plan is easy to follow, with extra cues reminding patients where they are throughout their visit.

The most dramatic feature is the tiled interior perimeter wall that runs along the waiting areas and up the main stairwell. Taking his inspiration from the bark of the park's sycamore trees, Yablon created an abstract, camouflage-like pattern in pale greens, tans, and grays that offers a subtle link with the outdoors. The clinic has an undulating slatted-wood ceiling throughout the public areas, reflective white paneling for contrast on the corridor walls, and floor-to-ceiling windows in the stairwells that look out on the green lawn and play areas behind the building. The project's sustainable features will qualify it for a LEED-CI Gold rating.

The firm employed similar gestures in Harlem, putting the waiting area near the windows in the back of the space. But since the view was of a service alley, SYA covered the windows with translucent panels embedded with an Ithemba bead mesh created by South African women living with HIV and AIDS. Natural finish porcelain tile and bamboo paneling line the corridor walls on one side, with glassy white epoxy-coated walls on the other. The project will meet NYC's High Performance Guidelines.

So how well did the guidelines work? "In designing Chelsea, we've realized we should allow for more flexibility in the room layouts and for overflow times when there are greater demands for immunization," says Yablon. "But for the most part we were on target and the project could start quickly." And Burney concurs. "These are now very service-oriented, inviting facilities," he says. "The clinic staff has been very enthusiastic, and people feel comfortable coming to them. We've accomplished a complete turnaround."

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