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Casa de Amigos Community Health Center

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Casa de Amigos, the Harris County Community Health Center located at 1615 North Main on Houston's old North Side, goes a long way towards making something special from a difficult and paradoxical problem. In this case the paradoxes have more to do with defining the relationship between serving institutions and the society they are supposed to serve than with the precious ambiguities of architectural theory.

Discussing the criteria for Casa de Amigos might sound a bit like an episode of "Point-Counterpoint," that parodic television debate which pitted air-headed liberalism against conservative nastiness. While one view would have it that the neighborhood clinic should become a part of the neighborhood it serves, a place where clients feel right at home coming in and being treated, the motley collection of buildings and street life along this stretch of Main Street do not give many clues about what could become of this area. In addition, the security problems for a building of this type are formidable. Not only was it important to make the clinic physically secure, especially the treasure house of pharmaceuticals, the clinic staff also wanted it to be possible for someone to work in the building at night without being observed from outside.

The building could easily have been made to look like a fortified, institutional outpost, and, indeed, it was suggested by someone from the county staff (tongue in cheek, I hope) that a wire fence around the property might be an appropriate way to make the building more impregnable and the parking lot safe from sleeping vagrants. It is very much to the credit of the designers, Houston's Urban Architecture, Inc., that these kinds of suggestions were resisted and instead that the complex circumstances were used to make a dignified and visually appealing building.

The portion of Main Street where the building is situated is fairly falling apart into the kind of visual and sociological chaos that urban designers used to call "transitional zones." It is a familiar sight in most older cities. From the parking lot of Casa de Amigos, you can look out to the powerful new office towers in downtown, a view framed by remnants of an older Houston, and get a sense of the urban collage.

The architects, elected to protect the building by wrapping it in a high, brick wall that curves around from the Main Street side into the entry facing the clinic's parking lot to the south. The two major parts of the building - the flattened, semi-circular front portion, housing the waiting and reception areas, and the longer and lower rectangular clinic block - meet at the entry, the only transparent event in the otherwise impenetrable wall. The entry is highlighted by a concrete, wafer-shaped canopy that projects out from the wall, forming an entry porch under a stepped-up parapet and semi-

circular, Spanish Mission Style logo. A series of glass-block windows, flush with the surface of the brick wall, draw attention to the entrance, providing natural illumination while preventing clear views into the building at night. The effect is like a gentle collision between a streamlined, Greyhound bus station from the '30s and a simplified Mission Style building. The homogeneity of the brick surface and the abstract, compositional skills of the designer have conspired to reformulate these elements into a new language, a kind of Esperanto perhaps, that deals with the complex site-building relationship in an extremely effective way.

On the interior there is a similar contrast between the ubiquitous gridded plan of cubicles, examining rooms, and offices in the clinic area and the curved forms and glass block in the waiting areas. The clinic's treatment section is efficiently planned and says so, a kind of universal solution to the design of medical facilities where there doesn't seem to be enough wall space to accommodate all the doors. The waiting areas, by contrast, are more generous and more cheerful, consisting of three interlocking spaces, one for reception, one for adults, and a third for children. This central area, which is decorated in Necco wafer colors of grey, green, and pink, is extremely well planned in a flowing spatial organization that is clear and pleasant.

The contrast between the free-flowing waiting areas and the geometric austerity of the treatment clinic is a bit too sharp, a situation partially relieved by the sweep of the large, circular reception-control desk, which pins the two parts together, and also by the curved glass-block wall

that undulates through one of the corridors forming smaller patient waiting and preparation rooms.

The building is full of thoughtful ideas which reflect architect Hossein Oskouie's notion that Casa de Amigos might be a place not only to get well but also to get "pleasant." The playful interior color scheme, the step-down wall of glass block which reaches children's height in the children's waiting area, and the incorporation of a long, thin, walled-in terrace space on the south side to provide natural light and an outdoor view for the administrative offices and the staff lounge are only some of the indications that this building is trying for more than just meeting obligations. The proof that it works is reflected in the attitude of the clients, some of whom travel long distances, by-passing other, closer clinics, because they appreciate the ambience of Casa de Amigos.

Yet there is a kind of schizophrenic incompleteness here, too, which shows up in things like the lack of outside benches in places which beg for them (the security problem again) and in the uncomfortable austerity of the waiting-room furnishings, particularly in the children's area - things which add up to an all too familiar, institutional, look-but-don't-touch attitude. In many ways the building revives some of the questions from the '60s about how to bring the institutions of the city to the neighborhoods. The problem is slightly redefined, 1980s style, but it is encouraging to see a building like this which solves most of its problems without losing its sense of making architecture. ■



Casa de Amigos Community Health Center, 1982, Urban Architecture, Inc., architects
(Photo by Paul Hester)

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