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Facility of the Month May/June 08 - Sanctuary: New Jersey County's Model Juvenile Facility

A Beacon of Normative Justice

By Roibín Ó hÉochaidh



Photos by Mikiko Kikuyama

Much like Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty, which has for more than a century, embraced individuals in need of a second chance at life, the new \$27 million Union County Juvenile Detention Center in Linden, N.J., provides male and female wards with an opportunity to change their lives for the better in an environment of direction, order, humanity and safety.

The new center is a world away from the county's existing juvenile facility, which occupied the 6th floor of a judicial-complex parking structure in Elizabeth. The facility, which was built in 1968 to accommodate 34 single-cell beds, was outmoded, overcrowded, dilapidated and unsafe.

The 72,000-square-foot secure facility provides 76 beds residential and 4 intake beds within a square-doughnut footprint that encloses a central courtyard. The design enhances characteristics of openness and space within the facility and establishes a sense of connectedness with the outside.

Seeking to optimize light, space and connectivity, the design team incorporated steel, glazed-masonry and expansive glazing into a thin building design concept. Only one room deep at any given point, all facility spaces, from housing and classroom to dining and administrative, receive natural light from at least one side.

"This is a beautiful building that provides kids in trouble with a secure, safe, comfortable and positive place to overcome their problems," says Frank Guzzo, director of human services. "It's the light; if it wasn't a correctional facility, it would make a great school."

The center includes four classrooms, a media room with computers, an arts and crafts center, a gymnasium, an outdoor recreational area and four basketball courts attached to the housing units. Approximately 40 percent of the facility is dedicated programming and service delivery such as educational, counseling, recreational and day-room space.

The center embodies an overarching philosophy of normative justice in which offenders are not treated only as criminals. Incarceration at the center is not viewed only in terms of punishment, but as an opportunity to change behavior for the better in a way that will benefit the offender, their family and the whole community.

"Today, even within the detention facility, incarceration is secondary," Guzzo says. "It's programs, programs, programs; you've got a captive audience that will eventually return to the community."

Facility components are aligned along an 8- to 10-foot, glass-walled floor-to-ceiling common corridor that wraps around a linear floor plan to form a square footprint. The building envelope creates an interior central courtyard that delivers almost one acre of enclosed recreation space.

PROJECT DATA

Facility Name: Union County Juvenile Detention Center
Facility Type: Juvenile Detention Center
Construction Budget: \$26.9 million
Number of Beds: 80
Area: 70,000 square feet
Start Date: January 2006
Completion Date: April 2008
Owner/Operator: Union County Improvement Authority
Owner Representative: Frank Guzzo, director of human services
Project Manager: Joseph Jingoli & Son
Architect: Ricci Greene Associates
Engineer: PMK Group
General Contractor: Chanree Construction
Courtesy of Ricci Greene Associates



“This building represents a modern expression of architecture that creates an impression of order and discipline through linear structural elements, such as glazing or columns, but also embraces light, space and connectedness to the outside, and promotes transparency and respect for human beings” says Ken Ricci, FAIA, president of project architects Ricci Greene Associates.

Normative Space

Incorporating composite security glazing throughout, the building envelope also functions as the facility’s secure perimeter, negating the need for steel bars, razor wire or perimeter fencing. Integrated design elements create clear distinctions for span of control and facilitate both passive and direct supervision, while minimizing overt security components.

“The facility is dominated by glazing and the design yields beautiful lines of sight,” Ricci

says. “The outer skin is relatively solid and secure, while the inner skin is open and fluid.”

Surveillance cameras and security-access doors throughout the facility are monitored indirectly from a master control room, with a minimal number of camera installations deployed at strategic points to monitor access and movement.

“The courtyard enclosing building envelope wraps a round on itself to form a world of its own,” Ricci says. “This facility is completely separate to what these kids are used, it provides a sanctuary with order, rules and safety where they can find themselves.”

With high, atrium-like interiors, housing units incorporate a raked roof that creates a horizontal window-wall of insulated channel glass almost 8 feet off the ground. The design captures ample light during the winter, while shielding interiors from hot sun and high temperatures during the summer.

The roofing system incorporates prefinished steel trusses and overlaid decking and designers integrated colored wall panels in the housing units to control reverberation time. Sleeping areas are separated from bathroom facilities in a dry bed configuration.

“The facility is designed to allow wards to experience a degree of control over their environment and to have access to light and space like a normal person,” Ricci says.



Incorporating expansive glazing, high ceilings and accent paneling, housing units are infused with light, space and color.

Entering the center’s lobby, visitors are greeted by an exterior of glazed masonry units, while an overarching palette of sand and suede defines finishes, paneling and furnishings to engender a sense of calm and comfort.

The design team integrated a variety of welcoming elements, such as an open reception desk and wall murals, to further minimize the correctional nature of the center’s public component. The terrazzo-floored public foyer features floor-to-ceiling glazing designed to establish a sense of transparency and a light,

open atmosphere. Glazing again predominates in the visitation room, which is filled with natural light from two sides.

"From the terrazzo to the glass walls to the color palette, we wanted the sun and the warmth of sunlight to be the primary accent that enhanced various architectural elements," Ricci says. With a southeast aspect, the public lobby is adorned with a deep canopy to shield visitors from intense sunlight during the summer months.



Approximately 40 percent of facility space is devoted to programming and services.

While establishing the center as a good neighbor from a security perspective, designers also meshed the facility's architectural elements with the existing environment of surrounding mixed-use industrial and commercial buildings.

The facility is over-scaled to blend with a surrounding urban landscape dominated by big-box, warehouse and light industrial properties. The design team also interspersed more human-scale elements to foster associations with the facility's people-oriented function and to establish an aspect of intimacy and community connectivity.

County officials did not pursue LEED certification for the center, but environmentally sustainable concepts were applied throughout the facility. Extensive use

of daylighting, utilization of radiant heating in floors, integration of underground cisterns to control stormwater runoff — sustainable elements run the gamut from the prominent to the understated.

"The project generated a reasonable number of LEED points, but the county was not prepared to absorb the extra expense of getting over the hump for USGBC certification," Ricci says.

Classified as a brownfield redevelopment, the center is accessible from nearby communities by public transport.

"We think of sustainability in a systemic way," Ricci says. "We're adhering to more of a celestial scorecard with this project rather than focusing solely on the environmental sustainability and the accumulation of LEED points."

The Old and The New

The county's existing juvenile detention facility, built in 1968 on the 6th floor of a parking structure, was designed to accommodate 34 beds in an outmoded single-cell configuration.

"The existing facility was 8,000 square feet, old, small and dilapidated, and the state was hammering us over the conditions and overcrowding," Guzzo says.



Consistently accommodating 70 to 80 wards, the aging facility had no separate classification capability and was not big enough to accommodate the necessary programming.

The public foyer is designed to engender a sense of calm, comfort and transparency.

Although the county's juvenile justice system experienced problems since the 1980s, it was difficult to convince policymakers of the necessity for action and reform.

In 2003, the state set facility capacity at 34 wards following the suicide of 17-year-old youth, who hanged himself from a broken fire sprinkler. State authorities had previously declared the facility in need of major improvements.

"Things really only get done in crisis situations," Guzzo says. "We wanted to build a more modern facility that did not look correctional in nature, but that was still safe and secure, and the impetus was finally there."



Facility spaces are aligned along a common glass-walled corridor, which encloses the facility's internal courtyard.

The county put together an expediting team, which met every week for four years to discuss the juvenile justice system, detention and programming. The county committed to developing an evidence-based, best-practice system of juvenile justice adjudication, detention and alternatives, where support structures and networks linked facilities and programming with the community.

"When individuals get in the system as kids, they tend to stay in it as adults and that's mighty costly," Guzzo says. "It's cheaper to spend the dollars up front on prevention and diversion than to wait until they get into system."

Initially on the margins of the project, Ricci Greene Associates gradually assumed a more central role in driving the nature of the development. The firm performed a comprehensive needs assessment and worked closely with the county and juvenile justice stakeholders to establish detention bed space requirements, operational philosophy and mission, facility

concepts, and site evaluation and selection.

"Ricci Greene's only business is justice and detention, and they came up with a great design," Guzzo says. "They don't look at the building as just a building, but as one of many normative components in a system."

As part of the needs assessment process, Ricci Greene conducted a review of the entire juvenile justice system, recommending several reforms and initiatives. Developed in conjunction with New Jersey juvenile justice authorities, recommendations focused on streamlining the system, improving efficiency and standardizing operations and procedures.

"We wanted to bring Union County into the 21st century, while limiting the number of beds and facility footprint," Ricci says. "We had a highly simpatico client with a people-oriented perspective who endorsed our goals for the project."

The review recommended expediting cases through the court system and hastening implementation of court actions to reduce languishing paperwork and the unnecessary detainment of offenders. The report also recommended the adoption of standardized intake and processing procedures across the system.

PRODUCT DATA

Touchscreen Control System: Emcor
Televisitation System: Toshiba
Intercom/Communications Systems: Telecor Security
Windows/Skylights: CM Security Group Security Cell Doors: Weyerhaeuser Detention
Security Locks: Southern Steel
Plumbing Fixtures: Willoughby
Building Management System: Seamens
Fire Suppression Sprinkler System: Viking
Roofing: Carlyle
Insulation: Dow Chemical/Owens Corning
Floor/Wall Systems: Karastan/Centria Arch System
Ceiling System: Armstrong/Wilsecure
Laundry Equipment: Milnor
Correctional Furniture: Norix

E. Casey Foundation.

"The JDAI helped us overhaul the county's entire juvenile justice system," Guzzo says.

JDAI was established to reduce reliance on secure detention through alternatives to incarceration and its initiatives were implemented in more than 80 jurisdictions throughout the United States.

"You will never be able to build enough beds, so you need to achieve a balance between detention beds and community programs to handle juveniles who need detention and meet the needs of youth offenders who will benefit from alternatives," Guzzo says.

"For the most part, detention should be the last resort for kids," he says. "It's a field of dreams syndrome, where if you build it, they will come."

The initiative provides help in implementing a comprehensive series of inter-related reform strategies to improve and strengthen state and local juvenile justice systems.

At the state level, the juvenile justice commission has been implementing statewide reforms for the last five years.

"We spent a lot of time and money conducting the necessary studies to get us out of the situation we were in and we're better today in everything we do," Guzzo says.

Anger-management programs, home detention with electronic monitoring, nonsecure shelter programs, work and educational programs are all alternatives to incarceration endorsed by the family court system.

"We made the decision to build on alternatives to incarceration that were truly working and that allow kids to live under supervision in the community," Guzzo says. "It's an ongoing process and we're still developing responses, strategies and alternatives."

Right-Sized Sanctuary

Implementation of various recommendations generated during the needs assessment process allowed the county to reduce the number of committals and length of stay for wards, which yielded a significant reduction in the design capacity and number of beds required for the new juvenile detention center.

"We pursued a sustainable approach in theorizing and designing the project and in right-sizing the facility to best serve the county," Ricci says.

Preliminary projections identified a baseline capacity requirement of 90 beds, but Ricci Greene estimated that the number of beds could be reduced by about 10 and project costs by about 8 percent.

The facility features six podular housing units — two eight-bed 2,500-square-foot pods and four 4,000-square-foot pods that each contain one double-bunk and 14 single rooms.

"We were able to reduce the number of beds from 90 to 76 and eliminate one housing pod, which equates to about 8,000 square feet at \$375 to \$400 per square foot," Ricci says.

With a cost per bed of about \$350,000 and a facility area of approximately 72,000 square-feet, the project cost came in under \$28 million. Site acquisition, planning and development, and fixtures and furnishings increased costs to approximately \$37 million.

"You need to be very cautious with these kinds of projects," Guzzo says. "You don't want to overbuild, but neither do you want to under build."

Forced to transfer wards from its own overcrowded facility to other counties, Union County officials plan to generate revenue and recoup some of the capital investment by housing wards for other jurisdictions.

"There isn't a facility anywhere in this region to top this one, Guzzo says. "We've gone from a facility that no one would want to claim to one that set's a new standard for how things can and should be done."

The most satisfying aspect of the project and confirmation of a mission accomplished for Ricci was the reaction of correctional staff, and their endorsement of the facility.

"They liked that it's full of sunlight and doesn't feel like a correctional facility," Ricci says. "Most of all, they like that the center makes a statement in the skyline that is visible from a distance."

Incorporating transparent panels into the final 9 feet of its 25-foot vertical span, the gymnasium, in conjunction with the 14-foot raked-roof housing units, are transformed as darkness replaces daylight.

"As the evenings draw and daylight fades, these architectural elements glow in the distance like a beacon," Ricci says. "This is a building that announces itself as a sanctuary."

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

— Concluding lines of Emma Lazarus' poem "The New Colossus,"
inscribed on a bronze plaque inside the Statue of Liberty.