Project of the Month: Balancing cancer care with city life at SCCA

By CLAIRE ENLOW
Special to the Journal

The first thing you notice is the cladding: Warmly weathered ipe hardwood covers the upper stories of the SCCA Patient House in South Lake Union, just to the west of Alley 24.

Wrapped around the upper floors of the building, it surrounds the window openings with alternating horizontal and vertical orientations, giving the six-story structure a kind of handmade feel, like a modern wooden basket.

There’s no sign on the street of what is inside the upper floors. SCCA stands for Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, a center for treating a range of life threatening conditions.

The center itself is half a mile to the north, on the campus of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. SCCA is co-owned by Hutchinson and two other major institutions — UW Medicine and Seattle Children’s — and served by medical staff from all three.

For those receiving services at SCCA, the Patient House is a welcoming, affordable place to stay that is designed for their comfort and healing. Rates are kept below market, thanks partly to gifts and support through the nonprofit SCCA. Stays can range anywhere from a day to several months, and a caregiver sleeps in the same unit. A shuttle van, free to guests, makes frequent trips to the treatment center.

A sizable number of the guests are children, and for some just coming to downtown Seattle is stressful enough.

“Some of them have never been to the city before,” said SCCA housing and family assistance coordinator Debbie Fraley. Treatment can be difficult. Some patients undergo suppression of the immune system, and therefore heightened vulnerability to infections. Therapy can cause fatigue and nausea.

Providing comfort

Everything is designed with the goal of reducing stress, according to architect Scot Carr of Weinstein A/U, designer of the Patient House.

That means comfort and consideration of all kind of special needs, from the recycle bin in the hall that seals off the smell of pizza boxes to the

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Architect:
Weinstein A/U Architects + Urban Designers
Ed Weinstein, principal-in-charge Scot Carr, project architect and manager
Cory Harris and Danielle Rawson, design staff

Owner:
SCCA

Project type:
Specialized hospitality

Size:
84,000 square feet

Completion:
September of 2009

Construction cost:
$17.5 million

Structural, mechanical, electrical and plumbing engineer:
Arup

Landscape architect:
The courtyard on the second level can be enjoyed from many spaces, including the group kitchen. The Japanese maple on the right gives people a connection to nature, which can help with healing.

This is not a hospital. It's supposed to be an alternative for people who are in and out of the hospital, maybe on a daily basis.

There are guest houses for long-term patients in other cities, Fraley said, but this one — with 80 patient rooms — is unusual for its size. All such facilities must balance a desire for hominess with the need for a controlled environment for the medically vulnerable. Because of its scale, the SCCA Patient House can offer an array of amenities and let guests circulate widely through appealing spaces.

This project could have suffered from the NIMBYism that plagues other special needs housing. The fact that it didn’t is partly due to neighborhood outreach in South Lake Union, but it’s also because the building has its own neighborhood interface built right in.

The curving outer wall exactly follows the property line, a remnant of the turning radius of trucks that were part of the industrial history of the neighborhood, according to Carr. A small, street-level plaza at the corner completes the connection with the street and the neighborhood.

The building has 2,800 square feet of retail space, which came on line just in time for the economic downturn. The timing, plus the search for an appropriate tenant, has made it slow to lease. Soon a specialty store and gift shop called Shine will open in the space, according to Dean Forbes, spokesperson for SCCA.

The storefront facing busy John Street has its own doors. But the “real” entrance to the building is on quiet Pontius Avenue, where guests have secure access and visitors are buzzed in.

Once inside, SCCA Patient House is easy to read. There is a welcome desk in the light-filled atrium, with a glass-walled meeting room and a wide passage through the building to the shuttle pick-up out the opposite side, on the alley.

This kind of urban interface is possible because all the action is on the second level, well above the street.

Serenity, inside and out

A wide stairway finished with warm bamboo leads up to the bright, serene second level. Guests can choose indoor or outdoor exercise, dining and social interaction within a safe and controlled environment.

Views of mountains, Lake Union, the Space Needle and the city are spectacular. A grand Japanese maple tree, selected by landscape architect Karen Kiest, presides over a partially covered courtyard. And there’s a second opportunity to get outdoors — up four stories on the planted roof, with even more sweeping views.

Nearly all guest rooms in the four top levels are designed with a separate bedroom alcove for a caregiver. Two sleeping areas are separated by the bathroom, and on the other side a counter and
On the second level are lots of places to sit, talk, work puzzles or do nothing.

The plan and all the details of the SCCA Patient House are driven by three major ideas, Carr said.

The first is control: the need to make the environment easy to negotiate and comforting for guests, and user-friendly for staff and supporters. There is an option for total, self-contained retreat, but also for different levels of interaction.

The second is movement: Walking has been identified by doctors as an important factor in recovery. People can make a full circulation loop in the interior and there is ample room to walk around the exterior courtyard, much of which is protected from the rain.

And the third is “sensorial distraction”: Carr said this project delivers, from appealing toys and a foosball set to the meditative landscape in the courtyard and commanding views.

The package of choices, for diversion and interaction, is impressive. There is an enclosed room for screening videos and TV, with traditional movie house seating. Yoga classes are held in the bright wellness and training room. The kids' room is protected by a detailed wooden wall that has niches with enticing toys displayed to passers-by.

A communal kitchen has separate cook centers and a bank of individual refrigerators for use by guests. Communal meals also can be arranged.

SCCA Patient House delivers an impressive environmental performance package. Designed to meet the super-stringent standards of the current Architecture 2030 Challenge, it is also in line for LEED gold certification. As befits the special circumstances and sensitivities of guests, temperatures in all the rooms are on separate controls, and windows are operable. Filtered air is supplied to all indoor spaces. Plenty natural light adds to the energy performance, and low-volatile finishes contribute to interior air quality. Cabinets, tables, stair treads and windowsills in rooms are all crafted with sustainable bamboo.

Inside a robust thermal envelope, the high-performance heating and cooling system is sensitive to variations in air temperature. It responds with a combination of rooftop heat recovery and thermal exchange within refrigerant lines.

Inventing the healing environment is an ongoing quest. At the SCCA Patient House, a special wall system replaces the ubiquitous handrail in guest room corridors. The laminate-over-wood fabrication doubles as sleek wainscoting.

“The idea is to make it as non-institutional as possible,” said Carr.

Jury comments:

“A welcome exploration of what could have been a really mundane building. Warm exterior wood siding in the parquet pattern is a surprising exterior material; it adds a vaguely exotic feel to a very simple, flat façade.”

“Design of common spaces is spare but still warm. The high degree of transparency through the second floor common space seems very inviting.”

The Project of the Month is sponsored by the Daily Journal of Commerce and the Seattle chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The Project of the Month for July, the SCCA Patient House, was selected with the assistance of architect Sean Canady, architect Robert Miller and consultant Ellen Southard. For information about submitting projects, contact Stephanie Pure at AIA Seattle at (206) 448-4938, or stephaniep@aiaseattle.org.
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