

BUILDING DIALOGUE

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St. Vrain Community Hub: Centralized Human Services

Boulder County recognized the need to centralize its human services into one integrated space that was easier to navigate than the existing overcrowded facility housed in a collection of disparate buildings. In addition to providing easier access to services for members of the community, the reimagined campus, known as the St. Vrain Community Hub, also needed to be a beautiful and sustainable space that was comfortable for clients who often felt anxious about or stigmatized by taking advantage of county services, as well as for employees who needed areas of respite from an often-stressful occupation.

As the first LEED Platinum building in Longmont, the St. Vrain Community Hub improves the experience for both health and human services clients and providers. The easily accessible center supports residents efficiently and holistically, improving communication and collaboration between departments and ultimately helping to build a healthier, more stable community.

Boulder County engaged OZ Architecture to design a new 75,000-square-foot addition to the 30,000-sf existing building, connecting the two and creating an appealing one-stop center for all health and human services departments with a look, feel and layout that would be welcoming to all. However, combining more than 10 social service programs onto one campus, while also ensuring enough space for future needs, was not an easy or straightforward task.

We spent several months gathering data and analyzing growth projections and market demand, conducting intense client demographic research, holding focus groups with multiple audiences, exploring the client's values, vision and culture, and examining the implications of integrating these many services into one building.

One of the challenges that needed to be resolved was the city of Longmont's desire for both the new addition and the existing building to blend into the surrounding historic context of the neighborhood. The resulting architecture features a stone base, which fits within the context of the surrounding area. The color of the addition's masonry was also matched to the existing building to ensure a seamless transition between old and new. Where city of Longmont buildings traditionally have brick cornices, we added a metal cornice for a modern take on a historical detail. Glass and metal panels were also added to accentuate the new architecture and add a touch of modernism.

In addition, the building's north-south site orientation, and the need for visitors to be able to access the building with equal ease from both the



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PHOTOS: James Ray Spahn

OPENING ART:
Comfortable and colorful seating in the spacious lobby plays off reclaimed lumber and for a warm and modern setting.

ABOVE:
The grand staircase in the expansive central lobby fills with daylight from clerestory windows and upper skylight.

PROJECT TEAM

ARCHITECT/INTERIOR DESIGN:
OZ Architecture

CLIENT:
Boulder County Building Services

ENGINEERS: MECHANICAL,
ELECTRICAL & PLUMBING:
RMH Group;
STRUCTURAL: SCI;
CIVIL: JVA

GENERAL CONTRACTOR:
Adolfson & Peterson Construction

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:
PCS Group

parking lot and the street, presented a series of unusual design considerations. Our solution was to design dual entries for users and staff, each of which would feel like the primary entrance.

In order to create a space that avoided feeling like an unwelcoming government building, we planned a spacious and open central lobby featuring a grand staircase, a balcony encircling the second floor and the installation of windows to allow light to penetrate into the building from the third level. Reclaimed lumber salvaged from a nearby church added soft, warm tones. The result is an inviting interior flooded with daylight from a large skylight and clerestory windows and features clean, modern lines and warm wood trim.

"It has become a gathering place for the community," says Chris Saunders, Boulder County Housing & Human Services Program Operations manager. "People come to hang out there just because it feels good."

What's more, research showed that clients often felt confused about where to go upon arrival, so we designed a lobby "navigation station," giving visitors a designated starting point in locating their destination. From there, they move to one of the many private, multi-use meeting rooms where staff from each of the assisting departments can work with them in a one-on-one setting.

It was also critical to the county that the building reflect the high value they place on sustainability and stewardship of resources. Accordingly, we set to work ensuring that the new facility would achieve the highest LEED rating (Platinum) and achieve exceptional levels of energy savings, water reduction, CO₂ emissions reductions and high indoor air quality.

Acquiring LEED Platinum certification required extensive early planning and aggressive goal setting. In fact, the desire for LEED Platinum certification played a critical role in the initial site selection, with the building intentionally sited in downtown Longmont, just a block from the main bus terminal and central to businesses and services. Encouraging and facilitating alternative transportation also led to the inclusion of a bike maintenance area, outdoor and covered bike racks and electric vehicle charging stations around the building.

Other sustainable elements of the project included onsite recycling and composting with a station for hard-to-recycle items and composting in the bathrooms, a garden with plants native to the area, and rain gardens for stormwater management. Additionally, bringing in as much natural light as possible in order to cut down on the use of light fixtures was a top priority. The final campus is filled with daylight via interior light wells and skylights, solar tubes and open offices along perimeter walls. Ultimately, the St. Vrain Community Hub building design will result in a 48-percent reduction in energy use and 43 percent energy cost savings.

The interior office design fosters intradepartmental interaction and communication and takes into account the desire among the staff for areas of separation where they can take refuge from what is frequently a demanding job. Workers now have formal and informal meeting areas, a pocket park outside, training rooms, a fitness area, work cafés on each floor and a "retreat space" where they can work privately with clients in distress or who are going through extremely challenging situations.

In the new building, offices are better designed to accommodate both resident workers who spend more than 50 percent of their time in the office, as well as mobile workers who spend more than 50 percent of their time out of the office. We designed dedicated workspaces and private offices for resident workers, while mobile workers can choose from unassigned touch-down spaces or a variety of other work settings when they are on-site in the office. Varying "neighborhoods" were created with designated zones for working quietly, collaboratively or actively.

Because Boulder County anticipates that workspace needs will change significantly as integrations and client processes change, the space was also designed with flexibility in mind. Workstation layouts and furniture dimensions were carefully studied and laid out to allow for more to be added in the future with minimal disruption to the built environment.

Most importantly for the building's employees and clients, however, is that it feels warm, welcoming and inclusive.

"The building reflects the culture of Boulder County Health and Human Services," Saunders says. "When people walk through the space they understand our vision that any door is the right door."

With the St. Vrain Community Hub, OZ Architecture has created a government building equipped for the future, and one to serve as a model for others around the U.S. Its sustainable, appealing, functional and thoughtful design offers tremendous benefits to members of the community who seek out services there and the staff who provide them. \\\