

A COMMUNITY CENTER FOR HOMELESS TEENS: PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AS  
A TOOL TO EMPOWER VULNERABLE YOUTH

Erin Yen

Honors Thesis: ARCH 4216

MAY 6, 2020

Homeless youth are known as the “invisible problem” in America, identified as such for their tendency to slip through the cracks of societal infrastructure. These teenagers live in their cars, couch-surf, or engage in “survival sex” for shelter, and are generally written off simply as “bad” kids at school. Their plight too often persists into adulthood, at which point it becomes much more difficult for them to reverse the trajectory of their life. Having missed out on the critical emotional and academic maturation processes typically undergone during an uninterrupted adolescence, many young trauma victims are “frozen” emotionally and mentally at the age they were when they were first forced to enter survival mode. Pivot is a non-profit organization which intercedes in the lives of homeless youth, providing them with the counseling, resources, and skills needed to overcome their traumas and continue their growth into successful and functioning adults.

Pivot, however, currently inhabits an old warehouse in an industrial neighborhood of Oklahoma City – a rather grim environment for youth already at their most emotionally and mentally vulnerable. The building has almost no natural light, low ceilings, and narrow, disorienting hallways. Though Pivot has done its best to brighten their space with colorful walls and comfortable furniture, it nevertheless presents as an institution – a clinic at best, and a prison at worst. For children and young adults who have traumatic associations with institutional environments such as hospitals, foster homes, and juvenile detention centers, the current Pivot facility is ill-disposed to the processes of healing and growth.

The need for a new facility conducive to the mission of Pivot is undeniable. How an inanimate building can truly serve clients as Pivot’s employees and programs do,

however, remains a question. The solution ultimately presents itself in two key points taken from interviews with homeless teens and Pivot personnel: first, most of these teens are experiencing unbelievable hardships that anyone – let alone people so young – are entirely unequipped to handle. Because of such early trauma, homeless teens struggle mentally, emotionally, physically and financially throughout their transition to adulthood, and are thereby consistently devalued by society, their peers, and even themselves. From this realization, the premise of the project came to light – Pivot requires a facility which will restore the dignity and worth of clients by empowering them to take control of their own physical surroundings and by extent, their lives. Pivot empowers their clients by providing shelter, food, and lessons in life skills through a progressive healing process that begins with meeting basic physical needs and concludes with furthering emotional and educational well-being; the physical environment can and will be yet another tool Pivot utilizes in this comprehensive healing process.

The second major takeaway from the interviews is that each teen's story was completely different. No one person's trauma or trauma-response will ever exactly match that of the next, and their path to healing and growing will therefore never be the same. It is unrealistic, even somewhat egotistical to assume a blanket solution for all "homeless youth," can be developed, as if these teens were a single entity rather than individuals with individual needs and desires. This realization brings forth the overarching concept for the project – Pivot requires a facility which will celebrate the individuality and autonomy of their teens within the necessary framework of security and stability. The design for such a place will give a population accustomed to being

intimidated and pushed around by authorities and institutions the right and opportunity to instead exercise their own agency through environmental manipulation; in short, the architecture of Pivot can empower its clients to create and control the physical space around them.

In moving from pure conceptual thought to spatial form, the idea of flexibility and celebrating individual choice remains central to the design. Such a concept cannot be manifested in a perfunctory manner; rather, it must dictate every aspect of the project. Thus, the idea of rooms that are customizable and flexible in and of themselves – rather than simply containing small flexible features – comes forth. Many of the programmed spaces for the Pivot facility, such as the classroom, the conference rooms, the teen lounge, and the multipurpose space are not static in their uses and needs anyway. Sometimes a large class or discussion will be held, while other times only small group meetings will occur; some teens will be most comfortable in a large social setting surrounded by peers, while some will only feel safe in a more enclosed, intimate space; some fundraising functions or other special events may require a spacious, clear area with room for catering and dancing and socializing, while a room used for an emergency shelter will need to be subdivided into individual sleeping areas for an unknown and ever-changing number of clients. The idea of rooms that are not fixed in either location or scale not only is possible but makes a great deal of sense. In dealing with a constant influx of vulnerable youth, Pivot must be able to adapt to constantly changing needs - a space that can do the same will be a powerful tool to add to their already-impressive arsenal of counselors, coaches, and volunteers.

A truly customizable space requires a large, open area free of obstructions that may hinder moving parts – a space that serves simply as a “blank slate” for clients to use according to their own needs and desires. Several design iterations centering around the creation of such a space revealed that the smaller, fixed program – primarily service spaces and offices with privacy requirements - are not conducive to mobile rooms and will not be able to easily intermix without hindering the overall functionality of the space. Thus, the offices and service spaces stand along the long perimeters of the site as sheltering elements for the more client-rich central space. These “side-wings” stand as buffers between the clients and the public street and parking lot, in order to reduce the feeling of vulnerability in traumatized youth and enable them to feel relaxed enough to take full advantage of the more central, flexible space, which was established in between the two wings, stretching unobstructed from east to west. Within this double-height central space, a heavy timber framework fixed on a 6-foot module, clear-spanning 50 feet, stands exposed as a physical expression of stability. The structural expression and the sheltering wings are vital to the design despite not being themselves mobile; these elements enable the flexible space to be effective, both conceptually and physically. One of Pivot’s primary objectives is to provide the shelter and stability their clients need to feel safe enough to take the risks necessary for self-improvement and eventual self-reliance. Their philosophy is that youth who are used to fighting to survive will not be able to move forward and make positive change in their lives without some semblance of a secure safety net upon which to fall back. Similarly, Pivot’s clients will not be able to take full mental or physical advantage of the flexible environment if they feel vulnerable – thus, the layout and structure of the building serve to minimize any

perception of over-exposure and maximize a perception of stability, even just in the physical construction of the building.

Studies of the geometric typologies of warehouses or industrial factories reveals that a relatively regular and rectilinear geometry set on a module is the most effective method of containment for a system of moving elements. Thus, the massing remains regular and flat-roofed so as to ensure the functionality of the flexible space. Pivot's clients should not feel, however, as though they are trapped in a box - which is the danger of such a rectilinear geometry. To combat this risk, softened boundaries and plentiful daylight – one of the most lacking elements in the current Pivot facility, which is very much “boxy” – are implemented. In order to provide enough daylight into such a deep space, polycarbonate clerestories wrap around all four sides of the double-height room, reconciling the need for natural light with the equally important need for privacy. Furthermore, four skylit polycarbonate lightwells penetrate along the two long sides of the space, providing pleasant, fixed break-out spaces for lounging and further softening the harsh edges of the box and the rigidity of the corridors. To address the shorter east and west ends, two large openings – one hydraulic window and one hydraulic door – pierce through each end of the central space, enabling the entire room to transform from an interior space to a sheltered exterior space on nice days, and establishing visually clear points of exit for a client base that is accustomed to feeling trapped. To maintain a perception of shelter despite such large openings, the openings and courtyard on the west are nested between the protruding side wings, while the east openings and exterior basketball court are encompassed by a simple, translucent

polycarbonate wall, with a bottom boundary floating a foot off the ground to reinforce that though clients are protected, they are absolutely not imprisoned.

Within the unobstructed central space, various studies lead to the conclusion that a track system of movable partitions will be the simplest and most effective manner of creating rooms “customizable” in their position, shape, and scale. From a practical point of view, light-weight partitions on a two-way, modular overhead track can be moved anywhere at any time by anyone, without any explanation of complex mechanisms or operating systems. It is intuitive to push a suspended wall along a visible track, and the clients will be able to do so on their own without having asking anyone for assistance – exhibiting the self-reliance that is the entire objective of this scheme.

Outside of the simple practical mechanisms, this partition system utilizes one of the most basic, established architectural elements – the wall plane – and offers it as a tool for the user, rather than the omniscient designer, to create personalized space. The partition acts then not only as a vessel of empowerment and agency, but also as a module of spatial construction very similar to building blocks or linens in a pillow fort, thus evoking an atmosphere of playfulness and whimsy. Such childhood frivolities were denied to most of Pivot’s client base during their formative years, and to reclaim them now, in a safe space where such lighthearted pastimes as “play” are both possible and encouraged, may be therapeutic for adolescents – or, at the very least, some well-deserved fun.

For these walls to be feasible, several other partition and track systems were studied. Such research provided the base mechanisms that are required and revealed the need for a vast amount of unobstructed ceiling space. If the track is to be visually

and physically clear of interference, both of which were vital for ease of use and overall effectiveness of the system, other elements in the overhead space have to be eliminated. The implementation of an access floor system resolves the issue of ductwork crowding the ceiling space, as well as increasing the flexibility of where air can be provided – a distinct advantage in a space where rooms will be constantly changing locations, occupancies, and sizes. In addition, the full integration of the track mechanism with the gridded structural members fully minimize the amount of visual clutter occurring overhead.

The design of the partitions themselves have to fully address conceptual and practical objectives. The first and most conceptually vital quality of these partitions is in how they further the concepts of flexibility and choice. Though their mobility and modularity already distinguish them as the most overt physical expression of the concept, there are still opportunities to further exaggerate the idea of customization, particularly through materiality. The plexiglass that was eventually decided upon provides renewed opportunities to change not only location, scale, and shape of the rooms, but also the color – though blue, green, and purple were chosen for the purpose of representing the design and to indicate the multiple color combinations that can be created, plexiglass comes in such countless color options that the teens themselves can provide feedback regarding their preferences. Beyond the enlivening effect of the bright color options, the use of plexiglass contributes many other benefits; the use of a relatively thin plastic, rather than a typical partition assembly or a dense material like wood, allows for a much higher number of partitions to exist in the space, further expanding the arrangement opportunities for the clients; the translucency of the material



addresses the primary concern with movable partitions, which involves safety issues and the ability to continually monitor such high-risk occupants. Ultimately the slender, jewel-toned walls breathe life into this project.

It is often in the nature of the architect to create environments that manipulate a desired response or attempt to influence the users of a space in one way or another. In some situations, this is certainly a valid approach – it may even be desirable for some clients. For homeless and vulnerable youth, however, such a heavy-handed approach is simply reminiscent of the various authorities and institutional systems that litter their lives, all of which have pushed them into situation after situation over which they have no control. The removal of choice in one's life is so contrary to the natural state of humanity that it is used as punishment for those who commit some of the most heinous crimes known to man – yet it is inflicted time and time again on children who are already disadvantaged and traumatized, simply because society does not know what else to do with them. This continual loss of voice and power over time amplifies the teenage tendency to doubt and berate themselves; it is a destructive cycle, with severe mental and physical consequences that can last well into adulthood. Pivot provides an alternative option for youth, with a philosophy that centers around nurturing homeless teens and returning them to a physical, mental, and emotional state where they can grow into happy, fully functioning adults. The Pivot Community Center is designed to reinforce their philosophy and to contradict the disenfranchisement that homeless youth experience throughout their lives. It is a facility that, like the organization, is a celebration of clients' individuality, agency, and the right and ability to choose.