

Designed for healing

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A bright color palate and flowing lines mark the spacious hallways creating an open atmosphere at the new Ranken Jordan Pediatric Rehabilitation Center in Maryland Heights.
(Andrew Cutraro/P-D)

A new building in Maryland Heights that served to define the notion of architectural dynamism while empty of occupants radiates even more energy now that its population has taken up residence in it.

This is Ranken Jordan, the pediatric rehabilitation center created by philanthropists Clay and Mary Ranken Jordan in 1941. Back then, it was known as the Ranken Jordan Home for Convalescent Crippled Children. In the six decades since, its reach has grown substantially and has diversified as well.

As medical philosophy, professional practice and scientific technology have mushroomed and changed, so has Ranken Jordan. When the home opened 63 years ago, it treated children recovering from debilitating ailments such as poliomyelitis, osteomyelitis and tuberculosis. Nowadays, children who come to the center may suffer from burns, brain injuries or neuromuscular diseases.

In the late 1990s, officials determined more space and a technologically more advanced facility was needed. A rehab of the old building on Ladue Road wouldn't serve adequately the purposes. Luckily, almost serendipitously, a serious young architect with aesthetic ambitions beyond the homogenized was around.

In the mid-'90s, Ranken Jordan engaged Steve Hunsicker to work out some mundane problem with the building's front door. This small job was the genesis of a relationship that grew and flourished.

Rather like the children who come to the center, Ranken Jordan presents complicated demands. Patience and a willingness to approach the design problem collaboratively as well as creatively and humanely were required. Ranken Jordan is no slouch in the creativity department. When it was clear that a new building would be required - and equally clear Creve Coeur was in no mood for the introduction of an assertively modernist building into its landscape - a search was initiated for a new site. Eventually, a piece of land was found at the intersection of Adie and Dorsett roads just west of Lindbergh Boulevard.

Children contribute ideas

Any architect, any good one that is, spends a lot of time with his or her client in an effort to produce a building that is purposeful, efficient and cost effective as well as aesthetically satisfying. Sometimes this process works well; sometimes it's a bust.

In the case of Ranken Jordan, Hunsicker reckoned his client was not the center's officials but the patients, the children who'd be treated there, and he directed a considerable part of the process to listening to and looking at their communications. Although the grown-ups' desires and requirements were respected and are evident in the larger programs of the building, the soul of this building was conjured by its children.

Almost 20 years ago, Hunsicker saw an architectural exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris called "*L'architecture est un jeu magnifique*" - architecture is a magnificent game. The medium used to create the works in the show was LEGO. When he began the Ranken Jordan journey, he brought these mesmerizing building blocks along, and the children used them as a means of expressing their desires for the new building.

Like LEGO, the new building, the results of the collaboration of children, staff and officials and supporters of the center and the architects, is at once whimsical and extraordinarily serious. It is so good it is no exaggeration to call it inspired.

Hunsicker distilled what he learned from the staff and the children but always kept in mind one of the cornerstones of the Ranken philosophy - that the job is not simply to cure the body but to ready the child to return to the world where he or she can do the serious work of childhood, which should be a time of learning, of safety, of adventure and of ambition.

To that end, Hunsicker imagined the center as an Italian village rather than a hospital. Its heart is a piazza, into which feed the various residential components and treatment facilities - in-patient nursing, social services, physical therapy, outpatient services and hospital support.

The metal-clad building was constructed by McCarthy Building Companies Inc., and it embraces about 60,000 square feet - four times as much space as the old building on Ladue Road. The total cost, including land, was \$25 million.

In the central piazza, there is play equipment meant to draw the children from their beds and their rooms. It is a meeting place for them, and a place to show their family and friends their rehabilitative progress. Similarly, comfortable open spaces in the residential areas are meant to lure kids from their beds and into social interactions - and fun. To walk through the building is to encounter a festival of color and a stimulating jostle of scales meant to comfort and to challenge children of various ages, sizes and various capabilities.

What has been developed here is a breathing structure - organic, alive, always changing and activated by the movement through it of light and shadow, with spaces flowing back and forth, defined or delineated when necessary but generally free of obvious obstacles. Rising above all this is a tower - "every village needs a campanile," Hunsicker says. It is meant to draw the children not only out but - physically and metaphorically - up, to see the world from a broader perspective, a world available to them when the hard work of rehabilitation is accomplished.

Outside, for the children who're at a stage where they can manage to go beyond the building, are more play areas. The landscaping, by Ted Spaid at SWT Associates, is complementary.

Ambitious and original

Ranken Jordan's importance goes beyond its central role as a provider of extraordinary care to children and their families. It represents, and is an excellent example of, architecture the region so often does not get, architecture that is ambitious and original, architecture that is part of an evolution rather than a devolution into a poorly recalled and distant architectural past. Ranken Jordan challenges us, rather than bores us or disappoints us.

Ranken Jordan certainly makes modernist references. Although press materials tout it as being related to the work of Richard Meier, the stylistic debts are actually quite more glorious and are owed to the work of the great Finnish modernist Alvar Aalto and, beyond that, to the sculptures of the French surrealist Jean Arp, especially to some of his low-relief sculptures.

From above, the biomorphic shape of the building bears a remarkable and entirely pleasing resemblance to Aalto's popular Savoy vase, blown by iittala. Hunsicker says many influences were at work in the building, which was designed by him and his firm, 527 Architects, and by Lighthouse Architects Inc., but he gives credit to process, to collaboration and the understanding of very compelling functional issues and demands. He says also, having done work for Ranken before, he knew that the officials of the rehab center wanted a modern building.

"Creve Coeur did not respond to modern and that sent us looking for property elsewhere," he says. Ranken board vice chairman Rich Vandegriff, the center's president and CEO Lauri Tanner and Hunsicker shopped for property.

"The focus was to develop a much more multidisciplinary approach to the patients, the therapists, the nurses and physicians in a place kids would enjoy."

Pediatrician Nicholas Holekamp is medical director of Ranken Jordan. He has been there since March 2000. On the telephone, he says he was concerned at first about going out on an architectural limb with the new building, but believes "absolutely" its architecture articulates its purposes. He notes that visiting medical professionals are able to "read" the building immediately.

"It is not only ambitious in terms of design but also of size. We were little Ranken Jordan. Now we are a very big hospital. Our purpose is different from tertiary-care institutions where the work is aimed at saving patients' lives," Holekamp says.

"Here, the work is to bring them to the point where once again they can *live* their lives."

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