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APPLICATION 2021



ChildSafe Harvey E. Najim Children and Family Center | San Antonio, Texas | 2019

Architects: Overland Partners

Client: ChildSafe

General Contractor: Guido Construction

Photographers: Leonid Furmansky

ChildSafe is a trauma-focused care center for child victims and child survivors of abuse and neglect and their non-offending family members. It brings together health professionals, state agencies, law enforcement, and legal teams to ensure that more cases are reported and prosecuted, while the survivors get the help they need. The new ChildSafe headquarters brings this entire system, which previously had been spread across three campuses, under one roof, creating a restorative environment for victims, their families, and ChildSafe staff.

Located on the east side of San Antonio, the campus leverages the healing power of nature by creating a new park system that connects three existing parks—Salado Creek, Wheatley Heights Sports Complex, and Martin Luther King—with a new park and hike-and-bike trail system, as well as the surrounding community. The primary design challenge resulted from competing protocols of the various organizations that are housed within the facility. Child Protective Services and the San Antonio Police Department are required to follow strict guidelines to ensure that no case is jeopardized by a technical error and that families are kept safe.

Law enforcement, families, victims, and even self-surrendering perpetrators must enter, exit, and occupy the building in discreet and secure ways. Connectivity is essential in some parts of the building, while others need separation. Parking lots, entrances, and passageways are carefully organized so that victims never have an unexpected encounter with their abusers.

Because many cases of abuse occur within a child's own home, it was important that the facility feels neither residential nor institutional. Instead, the goal was to create an atmosphere similar to a nature or welcome center, embedded in the beauty of nature and accessible to both visitors and community members. This strategy is immediately evident upon entering the site: visitors park on gravel rather than pavement, sidewalks are integrated with the landscape, and natural bioswales filled with native plantings filter stormwater runoff.

The design is organized by a series of exterior courtyards. Each space creates a transition between the building and its entrances, with the main courtyard located in the back so that all building occupants can enjoy the gardens and park beyond.

The building is composed of four stone volumes, with the building entrances nestled between each. A sculptural roof shapes these openings, channels water to the terraces for collection to irrigate the landscape, and, most importantly, provides the inspiration for the building—a source of comfort and refuge, hope, and healing. Child-scale views to the outdoors, a sheltering roofline, and a healing garden prioritize the experience of the child. The biophilic principles of prospect and refuge empower children in their

seventy

environment, providing a sense of safety while encouraging exploration. Children can play, rest, and read in the Kid Cave—which is outfitted with toys and books—or underneath the main stair.

Immediately adjacent is an adult and teen waiting area with expansive views to the main courtyard. A history wall highlights African-American residents from the Eastside of San Antonio and their stories. This is where clients wait for their initial forensic interviews and where they will recount their traumatic event for the last time.

Upstairs is a second waiting area for returning clients receiving therapy. The space provides access to an outdoor terrace and stairs to the main courtyard. The therapy wing terminates at an outdoor terrace overlooking the healing garden, and the staff's office wing at a workout room overlooking a ropes course used for adventure therapy.

The best view of the main courtyard is reserved for the second-floor dining area, designed to resemble a large residential kitchen with tables, chairs, casual seating, a large dining island, and booths for the building staff to spend time with one another.

The campus supports total care and restoration for the county's abused children as well as ChildSafe's therapists, staff, and partners suffering from secondary trauma that results from caring for their clients.



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The Chicago Athenaeum | 601 South Prospect Street
Galena, Illinois 61036, USA | Tel: 815/777-4444 | Fax: 815/777-2471
E-mail: curatorial@chicagoathenaeum.org



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