

ARCH

PERSPECTIVES ON ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN IN EASTERN OKLAHOMA

On The Road



Native Healing

Originally written for Texas Architect, this article appears in the July/August 2012 issue.

A new state-of-the-art medical center in Ada embraces the Chickasaw Nation's heritage while offering the latest technology in modern health and wellness

by Brian L. Freese, AIA

Chickasaw Nation Medical Center

"Reactions from patients and staff to the CNMC are nothing short of effusive. Just the other day, I was talking to a staff member, and totally unsolicited she proceeded to tell me how much she loves working here," Dr. Parker recounted. "She said, 'I love coming to work each day. It is so beautiful and light-filled.' It's not an isolated event. I hear this all the time."

The wind blows strong across the low, rolling plains of central Oklahoma. Standing quietly and listening to the wind in this place — where a razor-sharp horizon seams together land and sky — one can sense the spirits of Native Americans who for generations lived and thrived on the land. These were a people who found, after torturous travels westward during the Trail of Tears, a place that in its sheer vastness accepted them and offered the opportunity to rebuild their way of life. And so it was, and so it has been for the Chickasaw Nation in this place of raw and expansive beauty.

Today, outside the small Oklahoma town of Ada stands a tight compound of buildings that, at a distance, shimmers like a mirage of some modern native pueblo within the verdant panorama. Built of modern materials by modern people — yet with forms, colors, and patterns that embody the coded meanings of an ancient culture — the Chickasaw Nation Medical Center has given the people of the local Chickasaw tribe a place for healing, communing, and celebrating their culture. As lead designer, architect Lawrence W. Speck, FAIA, of Page Southerland Page in Austin, capitalized on the tribe's rich history of crafts, textiles, and spiritual connection to nature, paying homage to those foundational elements both subtly and overtly in the design of the building.

The hospital is located in a rural setting, sited within the 230-acre property between a long, low hill on one side and a dense backdrop of trees lining a creek bed on the other. Among the many striking features that distinguish this hospital from others is the palpable connection to the outdoors. Transparent multi-level corridors connect the various wings, framing views of nature through the compound. Most interior circulation, for that matter, is placed on exterior walls to maximize views outward and natural light within. Visual intrusions such as concrete drives and parking are mostly tucked into the back service area, enhancing the integration of the complex into the surrounding land. From within, virtually every major space — be it a patient room, office, or public area — presents the sky and trees and green vistas in full panoramic view. Patient rooms are designed with foremost consideration of the person lying horizontal for long periods of time. Side walls are angled to direct the patient's view to large, carefully placed windows both low and high on the 12-foot-tall exterior walls, giving expansive views to landscape across the room and focused apertures to the sky. In the staff and public spaces as well, several large light wells penetrate the

main volumes to provide abundant light and outward views. "Sightings of wild turkey, deer, the annual monarch butterfly migrations, and other wildlife are common," says Dr. Judy Goforth Parker, Chief Administrator of the CNMC.

All this attention to sunlight and nature views is more than mere aesthetic affect. It is a response to a deeply held Native American belief that nature requires our abiding respect and appreciation, and in return gives potent healing and nurturing. Dr. Parker grounds this belief in scientific fact: "Clinical studies have proven that when patients have more views to nature, their need for medications decreases." An extension of this belief system is the contention that we humans should take from nature only what we need and no more. In this philosophical context, energy efficiency and conservation of non-renewable natural

resources became an even more rigid programmatic requirement than usual. Thus, the integration of controlled daylight provides natural — and free — warmth in the winter, resulting in a lower requirement for forced heat, and also conserves energy use by significantly reducing the need for electrified lighting.

The functional layout of the CNMC is also an improvement over typical hospital design. The core of the complex is a lively and light-filled public space referred to as the Town Center. The main entry guides visitors immediately into the Town Center, from where one decides with very clear visual aids whether to go to the outpatient clinic, inpatient functions (hospital, surgery, or emergency room), cafeteria, or the Healing Garden beyond. "Hospitals are typically confusing and impersonal places for visitors and patients alike. This hospital





Firm Name: Page Southerland
 Project Name: Chickasaw Nation
 Medical Center
 Owner/Client: Chickasaw Nation
 Contractor:..... Flintco, LLC
 Building Use: Medical: hospital
 with clinic
 Size of Building: .. 358,000 sq. ft.
 Budget: \$119,000,000
 Completion Date: . June 2010

is very clear and very beautiful,” observes Dr. Parker. “If you walk straight through the Town Center to the Healing Garden beyond, you will find staff, patients, and visitors intermixing, eating, and enjoying nature. It is really a wonderful place.”

Just as the aptly named Town Center serves as the working core of the hospital, so has it also come to provide for the community — somewhat serendipitously — essentially the same function. It and the adjacent cafeteria/dining room are almost daily gathering places where many non-patient Ada residents eat, socialize, and gather information about health resources. The Town Center has also become an increasingly popular venue for small local events, including the long-held annual community blood drive. The CNMC is, in effect, a compelling affirmation of the Chickasaw Nation’s commitment to universal healthcare and the wellbeing of its people. It clearly provides a level of community engagement that, heretofore, has been virtually unheard of in hospitals.

The CNMC provides yet another element central to Native American culture pertaining to the care of the ill: accommodating large gatherings of family and friends who may stay for days on end to lend support to their loved ones. For Native Americans, caring for the ill is a community function. Rather than the two or three family caregivers ordinarily present, there may be a dozen or more extended family members and friends who might travel many miles to provide comfort and assistance. Patient rooms include larger seating areas and fold-out beds to accommodate long visitor stays; gracious community rooms are provided on all patient floors; and multiple large public spaces and the Town Center all provide for the larger community’s participation in the care of loved ones. Even in the site development, special trails snaking through the lush surrounding landscape, as well as picnic areas and long-term parking accommodations, are aimed at facilitating and encouraging caregivers to spend long periods of time at the medical center.

Regarding its appearance, the CNMC is not the austere minimalist shell so often favored among the architectural cognizant. This facility is a joyous, riotous dance of large colored blocks, glass, and glittering metallic siding, stepping in complex rhythms. Each surface is an intricate bejeweled tapestry of multi-hued patterns and geometries. Lead designer Speck referenced and abstracted various indigenous tribal textiles and jewelry still worn by Chickasaws today. Specific tribal basket weave designs inspired the fenestration and surface treatments

of the exterior walls, as well as cabinet details and interior tile designs. A very particular Chickasaw beaded necklace was the inspiration for the designs of terrazzo floors and concourse ceilings. Traditional Chickasaw colors holding spiritual and cultural significance provided the springboard for color selections throughout the facility. As a whole, the building is imbued with ancient tribal symbolism and meaning.

Materials were chosen to reflect their local and state cultural significance as well. Native Oklahoma fieldstone from five different areas is used in public spaces both inside and outside, contributing a rich palette of tan, brown, red, ochre, and gray. Weathered copper used sparingly in key locations reflects the ongoing ravages of time and the harsh prairie climate. Private spaces are coded on the exterior with the less monumental materials of aluminum shingled siding and wood, in resonance with the prosaic rural structures of the Midwest.

Page Southerland Page clearly set aside many of the typical paradigms of hospital design protocol and instead invested their creative passion and humanity in creating the Chickasaw Nation Medical Center. Designer Speck gives special credit to the firm’s lead healthcare planner on the project, Gregg Ellsasser, who readily embraced all of the divergence from norms represented by the Town Center, special daylighting provisions, and so forth. As Speck puts it, “Gregg kept all of the machine-like precision of a modern healthcare facility intact while we tried to humanize and particularize the place.”

The result of their work is a community health care center inextricably bound to its site, region, and local culture. Far transcending a generic healthcare facility, this is a very specific response to very particular conditions. It eschews the common practice of assembling anonymous machines for healthcare in favor of place-making that supports the technology and sophistication of modern medical practice — all in a built environment that boosts the local community and exudes humanity and cultural meaning. One can’t help but ponder how the current state of health in this nation might be improved if more healthcare facilities had such ennobled qualities as this one, nestled in the low hills of a small Oklahoma community. ■



800-947-2828
 flintco.com



Preconstruction

Construction Management

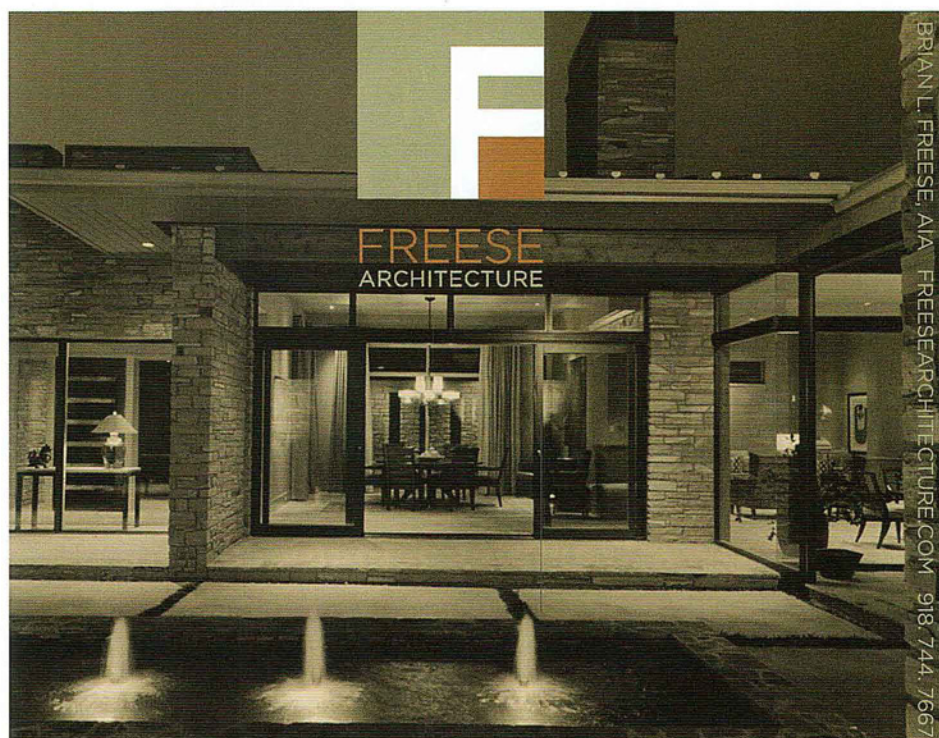
Design-Build

Program & Project
 Management

General Contracting



Albuquerque • Austin • Memphis • Oklahoma City • Sacramento • Springdale • Tulsa
 Flintco is a Multi-State, EEO employer • An American Indian Contractor Since 1908.



BRIAN L. FREESE, AIA FREESEARCHITECTURE.COM 918.744.7667