

METROPOLIS



A Rehabbed Center

With an inspired new adolescent facility, a Massachusetts school at last has architecture befitting the spirit of its mission.

Until recently, St. Ann's Home and School, in Methuen, Massachusetts, looked like something out of *Oliver Twist*. The school was built in 1925 as an orphanage, and its two brick buildings towered above the grounds, suggesting the sort of place where chores are as plentiful as food is spare. "It was really just miserable—what you'd expect a classic orphanage to be," says Bill Harris, principal of Boston's Signer Harris Architects. "It was so contradictory to the people who ran the place, the kids who were there, and the activity and life that went on inside, but I can imagine if you were a child approaching this thing, you'd tell your parents, 'Keep driving.'"

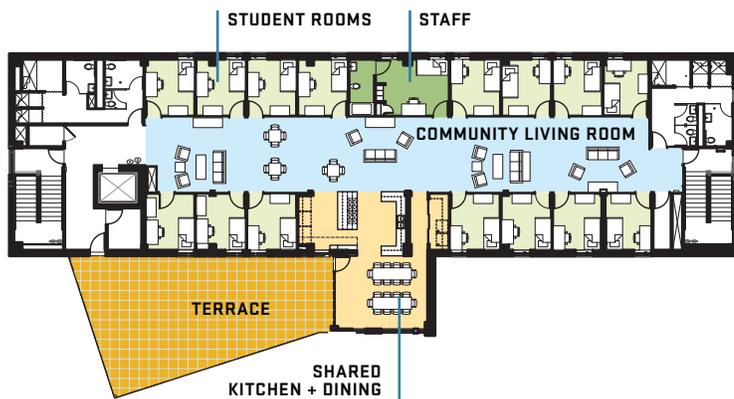
When St. Ann's, a school for behaviorally and emotionally disturbed children, hired Harris to map out a new adolescent center, he spotted a chance to refresh the academy's image. The budget was slim, just \$8 million, so Harris, who has designed educational facilities for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a day camp in Maine, squeezed a range of facilities under a single roof, including eight classrooms, a gym, 15 dorm rooms, and a dining lounge. The resulting center, which opened last spring, is both highly functional and strikingly mod-

An amphitheater (above) was the unexpected result of siting the center at the bottom of a hill.

Photo, Anton Grassi/Esto; plan, courtesy ideaworks

OBSERVED

A REHABBED CENTER



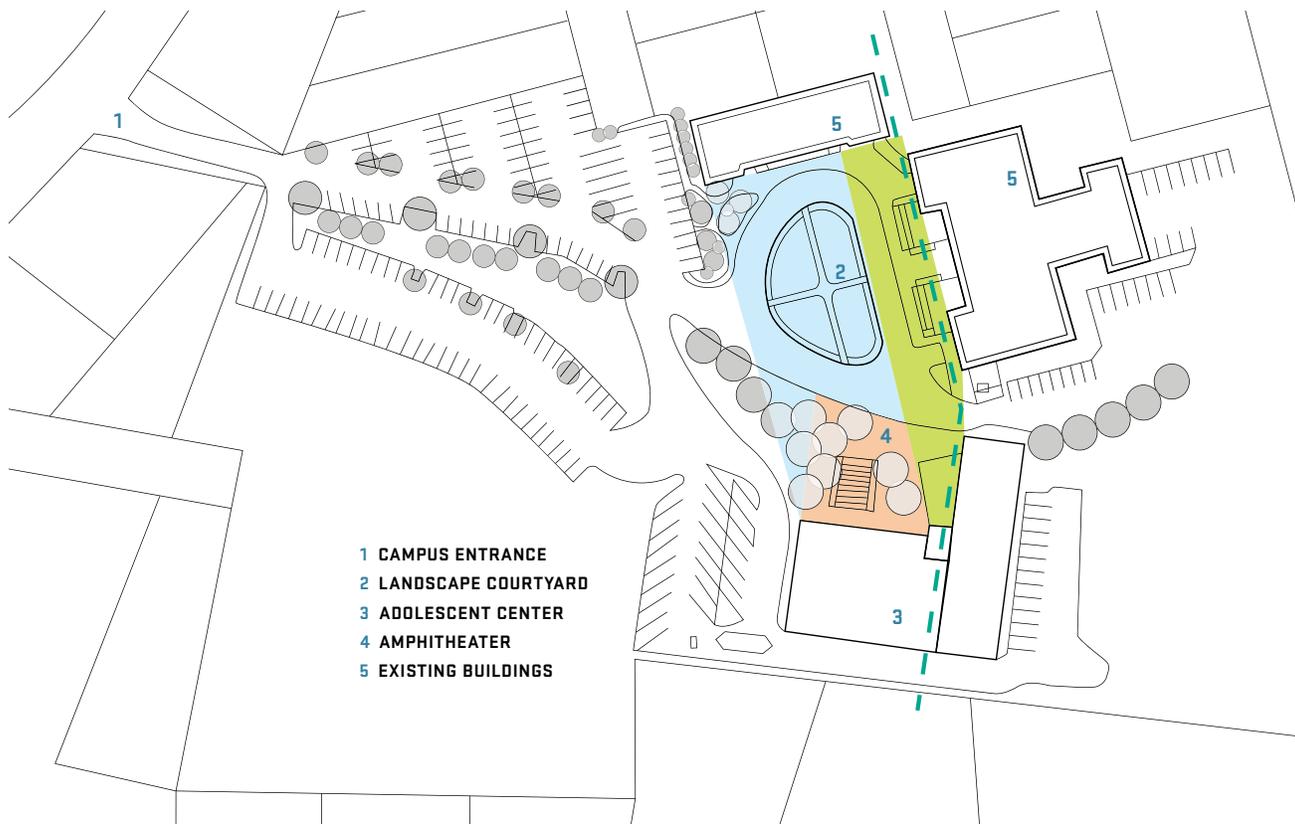
A building plan of the residential floor shows dorm rooms encircling a common area, encouraging socialization.



East-facing windows in the dining area let in lots of natural light, which is believed to have a therapeutic effect.

ern. Partly enshrouded in horizontal strips of mahogany (an echo of the surrounding woods), it bears more likeness to a chic alpine hotel than to the stuff of Charles Dickens's imagination. "We thought about trying to match the neoclassical look of the old buildings, but we decided, 'No, they're ugly,'" says Denis Grandbois, president and CEO of St. Ann's. "This makes a statement that we're in the twenty-first century."

Siting was everything. At first, Harris wanted the new L-shaped center to form a classic quad with the existing buildings. Still used for school programming, the old buildings draw their own right angle on a knoll, but the plan would have required pricey excavation. Instead, he pushed the center down the hill, positioning it opposite one of the old brick behemoths and perpendicular to the other. This spawned a horseshoe configuration that, while no Harvard Yard, still manages to set a campus mood. What's more, the sloped site produced an unexpected architectural feature—an amphi-



- 1 CAMPUS ENTRANCE
- 2 LANDSCAPE COURTYARD
- 3 ADOLESCENT CENTER
- 4 AMPHITHEATER
- 5 EXISTING BUILDINGS



The adolescent center forms a loose quad with St. Ann's existing buildings (above). The grand stair in the lobby provides students with an indoor gathering point.

theater that rises out of the nook of the center's ell. "This was," as Harris says, "a great surprise benefit of a budget constraint."

The adolescent center, of course, isn't just about softening the school's exterior. It was designed to cater to students, and the interior architecture does just that. On the residential floor, dorm rooms are arranged around a common area to encourage socializing, and a kitchen and dining room absorb plenty of natural light, which scientists believe helps stabilize moods. "A lot of time these children haven't been brought up in the best of places," Grandbois says. "These are acutely ill kids. They live here, they go to school, they get medical care here—it's really twenty-four-hour-a-day intervention. This is an opportunity to say to them that they're valuable." In this sense, the adolescent center is more than the new face of St. Ann's; it's redefining the parameters of rehabilitation. Please, sir, I want some more. —Suzanne LaBarre





Signer Harris Architects



Group Study Areas - Stratton Reading Room - MIT

At-a-glance:

Established in 1989, Signer Harris Architects specializes in creative and resourceful design solutions that are aligned with and supportive of the mission, goals, budgets, and aspirations of our clients.

Major Practice Areas:

- Institutions / Academic
- Office / Commercial
- Life Science / Research / Development / Manufacturing

Sample Client List:

- Boston College / Brown University / Mass Eye and Ear Infirmary
MIT / St. Ann's Home & School
- Beacon Capital / Cabot Cabot & Forbes / Endeca / Fisher Scientific
Harvard Pilgrim HealthCare / HealthCare Ventures / Maven Networks
MetLife / Venrock
- Biogen Idec / Biotrove / The Broad Institute / Genzyme / GreenFuel
Idenix / MPI / Novartis / Radius / Shire / Solectron / Tedor / Whitehead
Institute / VisEn / Wyeth

Types of Projects:

- 75% Renovations – architectural interiors and exterior envelopes
- 25% New Construction
- Master Planning, Programming, and Full Design and Construction Administration
- Interior design, furniture, fixtures and equipment
- Manufacturing / processing



Genome Sequencing Lab - The Broad Institute



Wilson Lecture Hall renovation - Brown University

“This project exceeded my expectations. The added design touches of the building are consistent with the above average quality of care we provide to our children.”

Denis Grandbois, President & CEO
St. Ann's Home & School

“The renovation exceeded my expectations. Signer Harris Architects was able to inquire of those involved, listen to what was said, and then translate it into the beautiful, responsive facility we now have...[it is] one of the best [projects] I've had in over 30 years in this business.”

Phillip J. Walsh, Director
Campus Activity Complex
MIT Division of Student Life