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A welcoming new home for ACRS

By CHET WING
DKA Architecture



Most nonprofit social service agencies work in nondescript commercial-looking buildings with uninspiring interiors.

More often than not, the leased space is too small for their needs, and employees, programs and services are shoehorned into every available space. The lighting is florescent, the windows don't open and small, bland waiting rooms often overflow with clients.

Constantly faced with dwindling funds and increasing numbers of people to serve, nonprofits find that facilities designed for their needs are largely out of reach.

The Asian Counseling and Referral Service, also known as ACRS, bucked that trend and moved into its own building on Martin Luther King Jr. Way last year, thanks to generous donors, in-kind services donated by the design team, numerous government grants and meticulous attention to every detail, material and square inch of the building.

The eight-year project faced numerous construction challenges, including a 27-month master-use permit process. The team, led by DKA Architects, also had to navigate through wetland mitigation, construction material costs that doubled, road construction mismatches, and a last-minute appeal that delayed the project by two years and cost several hundred thousand dollars. They also started site work during the wettest November on record.

But the end result is a four-story, 82,000-square-foot facility that makes an instant impression.

"What struck me at the very first was what a beautiful presence the building has on an otherwise bland site," said David Johnson, CEO of Navos, who visits ACRS frequently. "I was very taken, walking by the water feature and into the building; there is a sense of transparency, an openness and calm, which is very important in our business, and yet very unusual to find in our industry."

Financially strapped social service agencies don't get beautiful buildings, he added. But, "DKA created a great design that doesn't cost more, but at the same time is a piece of art rather than an industrial production."



Photos by Fawn Art Photography
Asian Counseling and Referral Service's headquarters has design elements common to many Asian and Pacific Islander cultures.

Honoring many cultures

The pitched-roof building doubles as a community center and houses a gym, meeting rooms, classrooms and kitchens over a 21,400-square-foot subterranean garage. The multicolored building has a style suggestive of Asian Pacific American culture that's careful to include features common to many Asian and Pacific Islander cultures and Northwest architecture. It's a welcoming, healing building; one that celebrates nature as well as the culture of its community.

“We wanted to honor the community and be welcoming to everyone,” said ACRS Executive Director Diane Narasaki. “We wanted a building that would be reflective of the culture but didn’t bend to any one specific Asian or Pacific Islander ethnicity, which was a challenge.”

In addition, ACRS wanted a design that included a lot of natural light, enough space to display art and an outdoor space for a meditation garden with a winding path. The building needed several kitchens to serve community celebrations and needed to be green and sustainable to reflect ACRS’ social justice mission.



Kalwall, a translucent material, resembles a shoji screen in this stairwell.

“The building uses recycled materials, energy-efficient appliances and has other features that make it a healthy, green building,” Narasaki said. “We also wanted light at every level, and this was a challenge

because the first floor is partially underground. We wanted natural light not only because it is beautiful, but studies show it helps us be healthier and more productive and can lighten moods and relieve stress.”

ACRS helps people through stressful situations and those that have experienced trauma in their lives so it was important to have them come to a place where they could be allowed to relax and meditate, she said. In addition, the staff often deals with stressful situations, so making the office comfortable for them was important, too.

ACRS offers programs for children, youth, seniors and families, serving 22,000 people who trek to the center from 18 counties. The clients speak 30 different languages and seek a wide range of services, such as mental health counseling, job training and placement, citizenship classes, voter registration, violence prevention, substance abuse treatment and legal services.

The agency is run by 200 employees and an army of 600 volunteers. It feeds the second largest number of people in King County through a separately located food bank.

Separating space

One of the bigger challenges was creating a building that separated the public from private spaces while accommodating the vastly different needs of the many services ACRS offers, said Mitch Yockey, DKA’s project manager.

A main corridor or spine divides the building, and the public and private spaces hang off the spine.

“We gave them a clear organization plan that functions on multi levels and that is understandable even from the exterior of the building,” said Donald King, DKA’s founder. “From the outside, you can tell that there are two separate things going on in the inside. As an architect, I like to begin the building design from the inside out and have more of the expression and articulation of what’s happening inside on the exterior — instead of the preconceived idea of the structural piece that you try to squeeze a program into.”

The building was designed in pieces visually rather than being one huge monolith, said Yockey.

“The series of elements almost gives it a residential scale,” he said.

The elements feature different exterior materials including wood, sheet metal, Hardiboard and Kalwall, which is a translucent material that looks like a shoji screen and allows light to shine through. The design team used feng shui principles, which guided color choice and entry points, to create a building with traditional customs of what is best for fortune, luck and health.

To bring light deep into the building, the team created a main stairway that has a light wall and skylight that helps one get orientated.

“We also have a light well in the middle of the building to let you see visually between floors and to give you that daylight orientation,” Yockey said.

To squeeze the four-story building into the 35-foot height limit, the team sunk the building into the ground.

“There was a lot of manipulation of the massing of the building and the height of the building — literally to the inch — to really get everything in and not appear cramped,” said King, “and to still have clear organization and still have some grand spaces and large meeting room spaces so the building could function and preserve that public-private realm.”

“We’re really happy with the results,” Narasaki said. “DKA is known for its culturally sensitive designs, and they created a building that is welcoming to the community, is highly functional, and they really worked with our leadership team and project director in conceptualizing how the layout would best serve our many functions.”



A water feature at the entrance creates a sense of calmness.