Soldiers’ Sanctuaries

Paul Alt is designing facilities that welcome, dignify and heal contemporary military veterans

By Dennis Rodkin

All images courtesy of Alt Architecture + Research Associates LLC
JUST AS WARFARE IS VERY DIFFERENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY THAN IT WAS DURING THE WARS OF THE 20TH CENTURY, the veterans who return from modern wars have vastly different scars and needs than their predecessors who fought in those earlier conflicts.

Chicago architect Paul Alt, AIA, has been on the front lines of the effort to create spaces that meet these needs, with a series of projects around the country whose aim is to welcome and support people who often feel unwelcome and unsupported in civilian society.

He calls the projects Healing Sanctuaries. “We’re creating military-embracing environments for the healing of post-traumatic stress disorder, brain injury and major depression,” says Alt, principal of Alt Architecture + Research Associates. In a facility that might combine educational and vocational support, counseling, historical exhibits about warriors’ service and other activities that promote veterans’ better integration into their communities, “architecture is a tool for creating a narrative that interlinks the parts,” he says.

The firm has projects in various stages of completion, planning and negotiation. Two in particular, in Iowa and Texas, demonstrate how a past era’s sometimes alienating narrative about veterans is being displaced by a more restorative contemporary approach.

The Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, is a monumental facility on an island in the Cedar River. Completed in the late 1920s, it was part of a tradition of grand veterans halls: part museum, part social space and crowned with a cenotaph honoring unidentified war dead that can be seen from many corners of the small city. But the facility had become little more than a big, dusty relic by the early years of this century. Some municipal departments had taken space there, and “the only reason most people in town knew about it was they went there to pay their parking tickets,” Alt says. The local veterans commission “was operating about 2,000 square feet of meeting space in this 110,000-square-foot building,” recalls Mike Jager, executive director of the Veterans Memorial Commission of Cedar Rapids.

In 2008, floodwaters filled the building’s lower three floors, setting in motion a process that ultimately returned the entire building to veterans’ uses, and a re-thinking of what those should be. “We were at a crossroads,” Jager says. “Rather than just moving back in and doing the same old tired thing, we took the opportunity to rediscover the original intent from the 1920s,” which...
An armory on the mezzanine level, a conference center and a restaurant are components of the repurposed Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

was to be a gathering place where the community of veterans and their families and friends “could sort of make sense of their past experiences by their present associations. Give them the opportunity to heal informally and get on with their lives.”

Repurposed, restored at a cost of $17.5 million and opening this year, the veterans memorial will have a combination of large memorial rooms and smaller spaces where counseling, substance abuse meetings and Great Books discussions can go on. “It becomes a space where you can bring your grandchildren and help them learn what you [fought for],” Alt says. “And you can come to be among people who have had your experiences, who understand what you’ve been through and want to help you go forward.”

Everything from behavioral health counseling to performance pieces designed expressly for an audience with military experience will have space. “Culture and music and counseling and the architecture all become part of the healing,” Alt says.

Jager believes firmly in the ennobling power of such features as intricate terrazzo floors, plaster walls and the stunning stained-glass depiction of an angel accompanying soldiers from various wars—24 feet high and designed by the great Iowa-born artist Grant Wood. “If you walk into the stereotypical American Legion or VFW hall and it’s a dimly lit place with a couple of beer signs and a couple of old pictures on the wall, it’s not really any different from any other corner bar,” he says. “But when you walk into an environment that is uplifting and inspiring and you’ve been [given] a sense of ownership, you will begin to live up to those expectations.”

The facility is supported by a taxing commission—numerous veterans memorial buildings and stadiums are funded that way in Iowa, Jager says—but the aim in repurposing it is to create a revenue stream as well. There’s a kitchen that can serve 500, and an auditorium of that capacity and a 180-person ballroom will both be rentable for events. But there, too, Alt sees a subtle healing effect: Because the rooms are restored to their original grandeur
and may contain memorabilia or signage commemorating veterans’ service, a veteran who attends, say, a wedding in the building “will feel comfortable surrounded by an empathetic environment, not alienated.” In that way, pride of place becomes a subtly therapeutic element: Though the veteran may not be hosting the event, the presence and honor of veterans pervades the space, essentially elevating any of them who are present.

In San Antonio, Alt’s firm is collaborating with Kell Muñoz Architects on the nation’s first stand-alone academic support building at a university. Rapidly expanding Texas A&M University-San Antonio, where at least one out of 10 students has military veteran status, is building Patriot’s Casa, a 20,000-square-foot building where veterans and their families can get help moving from military service into academics, and then out to the civilian workforce.

Envisioned by a retired major general as “a center of support to keep veterans in school,” Alt says, the $5-million Patriot’s Casa pairs ceremonial and pragmatic spaces along the same lines as the Cedar Rapids project. On the ground level, visitors will enter a large lounge or lobby area and proceed into a smaller space that Alt calls a “memory area. It will contain objects that soldiers carried with them, letters and objects of memory.” Beyond will be a larger ceremonial space anchored by a fireplace, with doorways out to a large lawn that will be the site of events such as graduation receptions for veterans. The second floor contains spaces for behavioral health, academic support and informal hanging out with fellow veterans.

The conceptual mix at the all-new Patriot’s Casa is similar to what the Cedar Rapids veterans building got in its re-formulation. “It creates a place of hope and possibility and self-realization,” Alt says. Veterans will have their space to “network for a job, have fun and entertainment, seek healing, and enjoy life. It’s in a safe environment for them, a place where they know other people will understand them and what they’ve seen.” CA
GET SMART
(Page 24)

HARVEST COMMONS APARTMENTS
OWNER, DEVELOPER & PROPERTY MANAGER: Heartland Housing Inc.
CO-OWNER & CO-DEVELOPER: First Baptist Congregational Church
ARCHITECT: Landon Bone Baker Architects
GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Linn-Mathes Inc.
MEP ENGINEER: dHMS
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Mimi McKay
HISTORIC PRESERVATION CONSULTANT: McGuire Igleksi Associates
COMMISSIONING AUTHORITY AND GREEN CHARRETTE MODERATOR: Harley Ellis Deveraux
FARM DESIGN CONSULTANT: Heartland Human Care Services
CHICKEN CONSULTANT: Jennifer Murtoff
SCULPTOR: Bernard Williams
ARTS-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION: architreasures

SMARTHAUS:
HOMEOWNERS: Aaron & Jenny Stash
ARCHITECT: Michael S. Kollman, AIA, LEED AP
CONSTRUCTION MANAGER: SmartHaus Inc.

DECONSTRUCTION: RE-USE Consulting
CIVIL ENGINEER: Infraland Engineering Consultants
LANDSCAPING: Guy Scopelliti Landscape
ELECTRICAL: Principle Electric
CARPENTRY: Principle Electric
HVAC: Balanced Air Heating & Cooling
UTILITIES AND DEMOLITION: Waseda
MECHANICAL ENGINEER: Build Equinox
GREEN RATERS: eZing Inc.
LEED FOR HOMES PROVIDER: Eco Achievers
SOLAR ENERGY CONSULTANT: Habi-Tek

SOLDIERS’ SANCTUARIES
(Page 28)

CEDAR RAPIDS VETERANS MEMORIAL BUILDING
CLIENT: Mike Jager, executive director of the Cedar Rapids Veterans Commission
ARCHITECT OF RECORD: Alt Architecture + Research Associates LLC
ARCHITECT: Kell Muñoz Architects
ASSOCIATE ARCHITECTS: Alt Architecture + Research Associates LLC
MECHANICAL/PLUMBING: Shah Smith and Associates
ELECTRICAL: CNG Engineering
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: R-S-C-R Inc.
ENGINEERING: Briones Consulting and Engineering Ltd.

STATE OF GRACELAND
(Page 32)

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Bulley & Andrews
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: The Structural Shop
MECHANICAL ENGINEER: Hill Mechanical
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Wolff Landscape Architecture
LANDSCAPE INSTALLATION AND MAINTENANCE: Mariani Landscape
CUSTOM WINDOWS AND DOORS: Grabill Windows and Doors
MASONRY RESTORATION: Marion Restoration
MONUMENT FABRICATION: Gast Monuments

INDEX OF ADVERTISERS

AIA Desinight 17
Architemps Inc. 4
BD+C University 46
BuildingChicago 37
BQE Software Inc. 15
Chicago Plastering Institute 4
Chicagoland Roofing Council C3
Daris Lee Harris Photography 17, 48
Hoerr Schaudt Landscape Architects 11
IMAGINiT Technologies 7
Intelligent Lighting Creations 7
Leopardo Companies Inc. C4
MediaPress Studios 45
NEFF of Chicago C2
Petersen Aluminum Corporation 8
Schuler Shook 21
Schweiss Doors 6
Historic Park Inn 23
The Hill Group 3
Unilock Chicago 43