

2023 SMR Architects Summer Internship

Guidelines for Courtyard and Entry Spaces in Permanent Supportive Housing

About The Project

During the 2023 SMR Architects Summer Internship, interns conducted a research project that analyzed Courtyard and Entry spaces in Seattle Permanent Supportive Housing.

Permanent Supportive Housing is designated housing for formerly unhoused individuals. In these buildings, the relationships that tenants have with courtyard spaces are particularly important, as they not only serve as a respite from the indoors, but as a transitional space that assists in the acclimation to stable housing.

This project was organized around the study of three buildings designed by SMR and operated by DESC. Research included analysis of the buildings' courtyards and adjacent interior spaces, conversations with the design teams and building residents, and observations of real usage patterns of the spaces. This project sought to identify strengths and weaknesses of these spaces in order to culminate in a set of guidelines - formatted as a rubric - to inform the design of future buildings. These guidelines can also be used to re-evaluate existing courtyards and identify areas of improvement as funding becomes available for DESC.

About DESC

The buildings studied were developed, and are operated, by the Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC). The organization follows the Housing First philosophy, meaning that housing is provided with low-to-no barriers/conditions, and is used as a transition space for readjusting to a stable lifestyle.

SMR Architects has been with DESC for over 30 years, creating dozens of permanent supportive housing projects and fostering a long-term relationship. The designs of outdoor spaces in these buildings have evolved over time and meet a core set of requirements, including maintaining sightlines from indoors, providing a smoking shelter for residents, providing outdoor seating, ensuring durability of materials, and more. However, many courtyards have seen lower use than expected. In an attempt to improve courtyard usage, SMR Architects proposed this research project to DESC, who enthusiastically agreed to support and facilitate the work. To make this happen, three buildings were studied: Canaday House, The Estelle, and The North Star, which represented diversity in terms of years of construction, usages, and locations and relationships of courtyards and entries. Research methods included resident and property management staff interviews, direct observation and design document review.



Project Timeline

This project took place over the course of 11 weeks, and was organized around the following activities:

- Core Analysis: Researching and diagramming the context of each building, becoming familiar with each building's surroundings and available amenities.
- Site Visits: Exploring building surroundings, and touring the interiors of the buildings and their courtyards, talking to building managers and DESC representatives to begin to understand the functionality and layout of the buildings.
- Observation: Learning how residents use the space, analyzing real usage patterns of the space to understand activity levels and core usage behaviors.
- Design Interventions: Using the analysis to inform potential changes to the buildings, following three tiers of feasibility: easy changes, intermediate changes requiring deeper analysis, and difficult changes that are likely infeasible for existing buildings but may serve as inspiration for future projects.
- Coffee Carts: Revisiting all three buildings, interacting directly with residents over coffee and donuts while asking for their opinions and thoughts about the courtyards.
- Charrette: Participating in an upcoming project's initial charrette, presenting on proposed courtyard design strategies and gauging feasibility to serve as a foundation for the rubric.
- Design Update: Suggesting specific interventions to DESC regarding one of their existing buildings, which might be implemented with future funding.

About The Rubric

For ease of use, the guidelines of this rubric were formatted into four key sections.

1. *Connections: Provides guidance on the first-floor interior spaces of the building and how they connect to the courtyard, with the goal of reducing the perceived boundary between the two.*
2. *Tranquility: Centered around comfort of users, aiming to shape the courtyard space into a "natural retreat," providing natural features and materials without compromising durability.*
3. *Security: Ensures functionality of the courtyard with safety, management, accessibility, and mobility as priorities.*
4. *Activities: Tailors the courtyard to all users and their preferences, considering multiple use cases and purposes, focusing on the feedback received from residents.*

This rubric is intended to be used as a set of guidelines, not a list of requirements. Applying these in a broad sense throughout the design process may lead to ongoing discussion and allow for the identification of points of weakness in a courtyard with ideas for intervention. These guidelines are intended to be iterated upon into the future as a foundation for many better courtyards to come.

About The Interns

Katie Luu is a senior at Foster High School and a Rainier Scholar. Prajin Uttamchandani is a senior in the Undergraduate Architecture program at the University of Washington, and is continuing to work at SMR through the Housing Development Internship Program.

This research was only possible thanks to the project's mentors: Augusta Milford, Emily Darling, Greta DuBois, Kim Anh Tran-Dinh, Rumi Takahashi and Stefanie Barrera, who guided the project team throughout the summer.

SMR Architects' Open Space Design Rubric for Permanent Supportive Housing

Building Name: _____

Building Information -- Address:

Year Completed/Project Stage:

Reviewer:

Review Date:

Use this rubric as a set of "guidelines", rather than requirements. These items are based off of a considerations for DESC projects, but can be used for other buildings as applicable.

Connections - How does the courtyard relate to the Interior Program?	Security - How can a courtyard remain safe and functional?
Sightlines - Both Staff & Residents should have clear view of all resident spaces.	Circulation - Reduce spatial conflicts and address security needs.
<input type="checkbox"/> Reception has unobstructed sightlines to all resident-occupied ground floor areas.	<input type="checkbox"/> Multiple pathways provided -- minimal dead ends and corners.
<input type="checkbox"/> Residents have open views through their spaces.	<input type="checkbox"/> All pathways and entries are ADA accessible and consider modern mobility aids.
<input type="checkbox"/> Residents can look outside from common areas for people watching.	<input type="checkbox"/> Pathways have multiple forks to allow for choice and variety.
<input type="checkbox"/> Substantial glazing around courtyard and reception.	<input type="checkbox"/> A central anchor for the courtyard enables pacing/circumnavigating and allows for wandering.
<input type="checkbox"/> Blind Spots are covered by softscape and security cameras.	<input type="checkbox"/> The central path has some more private, lower-use circulation branches.
Adjacencies - Courtyard should be near the building's core circulation and common areas.	Lighting - Encourage healthy uses under all conditions through good lighting.
<input type="checkbox"/> The Kitchen and a Common Room are adjacent to or nearby the courtyard.	<input type="checkbox"/> Lights are spaced out throughout the courtyard, providing sufficient lighting.
<input type="checkbox"/> Seating and Tables in courtyard are within sightlines from kitchen serving window.	<input type="checkbox"/> Lights are warm and varied, creating a comfortable atmosphere.
<input type="checkbox"/> The courtyard entrances are near the elevators or main entrance.	<input type="checkbox"/> String lights used to humanize scale and increase comfort.
<input type="checkbox"/> Multiple resident-only entrances, including at least one stair, lead into the courtyard.	<input type="checkbox"/> Natural lighting remains prominent, even if indirect.
<input type="checkbox"/> Multiple resident-only entrances, including at least one stair, lead into the courtyard.	<input type="checkbox"/> Light positioning reinforces staff surveillance through sightlines or security cameras.
Transition - Reduce the feeling of a "physical boundary" when crossing from the inside to outside.	External Contact - Ensure that the environment is private, for residents only.
<input type="checkbox"/> There is substantial glazing surrounding the courtyard.	<input type="checkbox"/> Fences and gates have small/no openings, minimizing contact with nonresidents.
<input type="checkbox"/> Interior and exterior seating is available near courtyard entrances.	<input type="checkbox"/> Courtyard is positioned away from the sidewalk and busy streetscapes.
<input type="checkbox"/> There is a mechanism to "open the building" such as a Garage Door or Operational Storefront Windows.	<input type="checkbox"/> Courtyard access is for residents only.
<input type="checkbox"/> Low-height awnings or building overhangs are used to provide immediate shelter at a human scale.	<input type="checkbox"/> Residents can people-watch from common areas.
<input type="checkbox"/> Keycard is not needed to re-enter building.	<input type="checkbox"/> Tall walls, fences, and trees enclose the space, feels like an "open air room".
<input type="checkbox"/> Increased approachability by humanizing the scale of the courtyard in relation to the building.	
Tranquility - How can a courtyard maximize Comfort?	Activities - How can a courtyard be tailored to all users?
Greenery - Aim to create a "natural retreat".	Human Behavior - Facilitating spaces for all.
<input type="checkbox"/> There was adequate planning for green space (both from construction, and from occupant plantings).	<input type="checkbox"/> Courtyard considers Trauma-Informed/Healing-Centric Design.
<input type="checkbox"/> Low, mid, and tall plantings create varying heights.	<input type="checkbox"/> Design aims to discourage destructive and unsafe behaviors. Materials are durable.
<input type="checkbox"/> A flat, walkable softscape for dogs, picnics, or barefoot users is present.	<input type="checkbox"/> Design provides a variety of conditions within sightlines, allowing flexibility and mental respite.
<input type="checkbox"/> Seating is adjacent to a variety of plant heights for varied privacy.	<input type="checkbox"/> Security camera coverage should be consistent to ensure residents get help if needed.
Biophilic Design - Design with environmental conditions in mind, fostering natural connections.	Variable Seating - Provide multiple seating options to allow flexibility in usage and activities.
<input type="checkbox"/> Courtyard minimizes noise and allows a filtered, slight breeze.	<input type="checkbox"/> Moveable seating is available within sightlines (option to use steel cable anchors to ground or tables).
<input type="checkbox"/> Existing trees are used for their shade and breeze dispersal.	<input type="checkbox"/> Seating is provided close to tables.
<input type="checkbox"/> New trees, tall walls, fences, and the building itself provide additional shade for the space.	<input type="checkbox"/> Seating options are available at varied distances from entryways and main circulation.
<input type="checkbox"/> Shade is provided along south face of the courtyard, if applicable.	<input type="checkbox"/> Mid-height planting areas are used to create private, semi-enclosed areas with seating.
<input type="checkbox"/> Courtyard provides a healthy mix of sun and shade at any given time of day.	<input type="checkbox"/> Some seating directly faces open areas.
<input type="checkbox"/> Courtyard is positioned on the site away from the sidewalk and busy streetscapes.	Purpose - Create multipurpose spaces for all activity types.
Natural Materials - Create a "natural" feeling environment without compromising Durability.	<input type="checkbox"/> Planter boxes are provided for resident use (especially if residents have hose access).
<input type="checkbox"/> Materials with wood appearance are prioritized for seating.	<input type="checkbox"/> Moveable seating is provided near the courtyard's entryways.
<input type="checkbox"/> Hardscape is minimized without compromising circulation or function.	<input type="checkbox"/> Multiple covered spaces with seating and ashtrays are provided outside, preventing conflict.
<input type="checkbox"/> Large, stable stones and rocks are used for decor/seating.	<input type="checkbox"/> Dog-only turf or open grassy areas are provided (especially with doggy bags).
<input type="checkbox"/> Concrete use is minimized. If used, aesthetics have been prioritized to avoid institutional look.	<input type="checkbox"/> Tables are provided in the courtyard (especially if they are chess tables).
<input type="checkbox"/> Shapes and forms of courtyard are inspired by nature -- biomimicry.	<input type="checkbox"/> A community BBQ/grill is accessible, on request to Management.
<input type="checkbox"/> Calming water features are implemented into courtyard, aiming to replicate nature.	<input type="checkbox"/> Courtyard design responds to its context (nearby parks, amenities, activities, and natural geography).

SIGHTLINES



