ABSTRACT

The Kirkbride Plan for Mental Health Care and Architecture: Historical Review with Case Studies of Adaptive Reuse

Katherine Allen
Adviser Andrew Dolkart

From 1851 to 1887, Dr. Thomas Kirkbride and a number of prominent architects were responsible for the design and construction of over sixty-three state mental hospitals throughout the United States. These institutions, built on what would be known as the “Kirkbride Plan” for mental health care, embodied the new belief that the solution for treatment of the insane was not through restraint but through a humanitarian approach of moral treatment. Kirkbride’s design was officially adopted in 1851 by the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane.

In 1854, Kirkbride formalized his “plan” by publishing *On the Construction and Organization of Hospitals for the Insane*. This publication outlined virtually every aspect of construction, organization, planning, and administration. The configuration of the buildings was to be linear as well as symmetrical with a central pavilion being the focus of the architectural design. Primary emphasis was placed on light, air, and circulation. The plan called for patients to be housed within the radiating wings according to sex, illness, and behavior, with the outer wings being reserved for the patients with the most severe mental illness. “Subsequent to the plan’s adoption, Kirkbride became the authority on the construction of insane asylums and his plans dominated mental hospital architecture until the end of the 19th century (Goshen, 1986).”

Of the sixty-three credited institutions constructed, twenty-four have been demolished and through my research I identified thirteen that were currently abandoned and threatened by demolition. This particular building type presents many challenges for adaptive reuse and requires creative solutions. My case studies present three adaptive reuse strategies chosen by private developers to incorporate the historic property into a mixed use development. Those sites were: Danvers State Hospital (Danvers, Massachusetts), Hudson River State Hospital (Poughkeepsie, New York), and Traverse City State Hospital (Traverse City, Michigan). Each of these developers faced the challenge of satisfying the community’s goals of preservation while attempting to make the property economically viable.

For these reasons, I have argued that the architectural, cultural, and historical significance of Thomas Kirkbride’s state mental hospital buildings demand uncompromised preservation. My thesis answers the question- “Will the current adaptive reuse strategies for Kirkbride’s surviving state mental hospitals preserve the architectural integrity of these significant structures? And if not what will?