Environmental Design in Support of A Trauma Recovery Program for Female Adolescent Victims of Sex-Trafficking:  
A Courage House for Courage Worldwide, Inc.

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ABSTRACT

The current paper presents the concepts behind the design of a homelike facility on a secluded campus for long-term residential care for exploited adolescents, specifically females ages 11-17, who have been victims of commercial sexual exploitation. The treatment model is innovative in that it is a long-term treatment and housing solution with no pre-defined maximum length of stay. Integral to the model is the assumption that the built environment has direct and indirect effects on mental health. This paper presents the research behind the design thinking and specific design elements to create a homelike environment. Research indicates the positive effects of a familiar homelike environment to be: support of a healthy, coherent life view; lowering of resident and staff stress levels and restoration from fatigue; facilitating personal control; and supporting socially supportive relationships. The result is that residents are more trusting and accepting of treatment. Research on the direct correlation between the homelike character and specific residential design elements to the success of treatment will be forthcoming when the model site, Courage House Northern California is operational.

HYPOTHESIS

The physical setting for a trauma recovery program has a significant impact on the success of the program and positive treatment outcomes. Specifically, environments that have a family feel and a non-institutional milieu greatly facilitate the effectiveness of a trauma recovery program. This type of environment supports a healthy, coherent life view important to therapeutic success. A homelike setting also allows participants to be more relaxed and secure and thereby more willing to trust and participate in their care. The residential setting facilitates positive staff-resident interactions, constructive behaviors, and positive mood. Much as human kindness and loving intentions create a family, purpose-built residential buildings turn an institution into a home.

Background – The Courage House Program

The focus of Courage Worldwide, Inc. is to rescue society’s throwaway children, specifically young girls abused, abandoned and ruthlessly exploited as simply merchandise or a commodity by the monsters of the reprehensible sex trade.

The demographics of these girls when they arrive at Courage House are:

- 100% had used drugs voluntarily or were forced to use while being trafficked.
- 86% had no father in their home and of the 14% that did, all but one was their perpetrator.
- 75% were raised in poverty and on welfare.
- 78% had participated in a crime and had encounters with law enforcement.
- 100% were diagnosed with mental health disorders.
- 85% reported sexual abuse and domestic violence in their homes.
- 70% reported being homeless.
- 75% CPS (Child Protective Services) had been involved in their family’s life
- A large number reported that members of their family had been or were currently in prison for violent crimes.

“A positive, strength based environment with experienced staff, interdisciplinary teams that provide a multitude of therapeutic programming options is what Courage House provides in addition to loving, healthy relationships.”

—Kelly Kerby, M.A.
Courage Worldwide Inc., Clinical Director
Courage Worldwide brings a message of hope and healing to these vulnerable children, "You were created on purpose for a purpose." Jenny Williamson, the Founder of Courage Worldwide, states the vision of Courage House is to be a place where these young girls receive the opportunities and resources to be all and do all they were created to, calling them "water-walkers, giant-slayers and history makers."

Courage House Northern California is a licensed long-term therapeutic home and program under the umbrella of Courage Worldwide, Inc., an international 501(c)(3) non-profit that is committed to the rescue and restoration of minor victims of sex trafficking. The programs at Courage House provide trauma focused services for female victims ages 11-17 in an intentionally designed homelike setting.

The Courage House becomes a place of refuge, a home for these abused children, children who have often never experienced the warmth and support of a healthy family.

The Courage House program is comprehensive, delivered with love and faith in the unlimited potential of every girl, and provides each resident with a Unique Life Plan (ULP) targeted at bringing healing to her body, mind, spirit and emotions, with a specific emphasis on mental health, trauma services.

Some of the most common reported mental health issues these children experience are drug and alcohol addiction, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, anxiety, self-harming and suicidal behaviors, as well as Dissociative Identity Disorder. A typical girl that arrives at Courage House has not only experienced trauma from sexual exploitation but she has been let down by systems set up to help. Girls enter the program with complex trauma that requires a complex solution.

Studies also show that prolonged trauma actually cause damage to the brain itself requiring long term treatment. Melissa Herrmann, Courage Worldwide Program Director, states "Research has shown that the vast majority of girls victimized through commercial sex trafficking, were first victims of sexual molestation and abuse at an earlier age. When trauma occurs between 0-5 years, it is complicated by what is termed 'developmental trauma,' which science has proven can literally stunt the growth of the brain itself. Additionally, these girls have undergone complex trauma as revealed through their diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which also alters the brain. The good news is that their brains still have the ability to change, grow, and heal with intentional, specific treatment geared for complex trauma. That is what they receive at Courage House.”

These children who are victims of a vicious crime need a new identity separate from their life in the trafficking world and they need a new destiny that does not include their bodies being sold. In addition, they need to develop healthy attachments as well as relationships with peers, adults and family members (when possible). In order to achieve that, they must feel safe physically and emotionally.

The idea of trauma focused therapy is to help patients expose themselves in a controlled, safe manner to traumatic memories and feared situations, to identify negative thought patterns about themselves, cognitive distortions and to provide coping mechanisms and new thinking patterns to recover from their traumatic past and develop healthy habits to ensure future safety. Ultimately this process can help re-wire the damaged brain, and

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—Dr. Benjamin Keyes, Director of Trauma Studies-Regent University; Mental Health Consultant to Courage Worldwide Inc.
allow them to experience true recovery from trauma, not simply the management of traumatic symptoms.

Courage Worldwide employs the H.E.A.R.T. Model (Healing Emotional Affective Responses to Trauma). Research on the H.E.A.R.T. healing model for trafficked survivors over the past three and a half years shows the model is highly effective in decreasing symptoms of PTSD and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) facilitating positive growth, improvement of God image and personal resiliency. This model currently stands as one of the few tested Christian models that show positive growth and development and healing for complex trauma survivors, particularly in the area of human trafficking.

The H.E.A.R.T. Model relies on Spirituality as a key to recovery. Spirituality can be conceptualized as an implementation of Aaron Antonovsky’s Salutogenic Theory. Salutogenesis postulates that a person’s ability to cope and resulting good emotional and physical health is based on their sense of coherence. Coherence is defined as a belief that life has meaning, that life events are understandable and predictable, and one has the abilities to manage their life. Certainly spirituality provides a coherent world-view.

**Therapeutic Environment of Care, A Homelike Environment for Successful Outcomes of Trauma Therapy**

Courage House is coupling the latest in healthcare “design thinking” to their holistic trauma treatment model for a particularly impressionable population. The provision of the homelike environment of a Courage House supports a healthy, coherent life view that is important to therapeutic success.

The deinstitutionalization of treatment settings for commercially sexually exploited youth is especially critical as research and years of experience together attest to the need to have long-term treatment and housing solutions for these youth. The majority of victims recovered, not only have significant mental health and emotional needs, but often have no other safe place to live that can meet their mental health needs.

Dr. Vanessa Snyder, Dean of Clinical Affairs at Richmont Graduate University states, “It is my professional opinion based upon current research that residential care be designed as a two to three year program for adolescent girls rescued from commercial exploitation.”

The benefits of a deinstitutionalized and homelike environment in improving outcomes by lowering resident and staff stress levels and enabling residents to accept and participate in their care in more familiar surroundings are now generally accepted. “Clinical environments that have a family feel and a non-institutional milieu greatly facilitate the healing process by allowing participants to be more relaxed and secure. This is especially true with trauma survivors who naturally distrust their environment and need to feel physically and emotionally safe.”

Most U.S. healthcare facilities strive to be less institutional and more residential in character to achieve healing. At one extreme, even psychiatric hospitals have changed. “A psychiatric hospital should recapitulate a real community in which patients (or residents) will live after treatment,” says Richard Lippincott, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. “You make the inside represent the community...
outside." "The image of village—houses, a neighborhood, downtown—underlies the new movement." "In the village model, patients (or residents) can exercise more responsibility and control of their actions," says Frank Pitts, president of the American College of Health Care Architects and past president of the American Institute of Architects’ Academy of Architecture for Health. (5)

Looking at leaders in behavioral healthcare, the nation's largest healthcare provider, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, builds homelike environments to provide care using their psychosocial recovery model.

The 2014 VA Mental Health Design Guide requires that a “Strong emphasis is placed on design approaches that incorporate homelike, non-institutional, and patient-centered environments that imbue healing, familiarity, and a sense of being.” “Warm, welcoming, and familiar environments often promote a sense of calm in residents and enhance their connection to their surroundings,” (often referred to as “place attachment”). (6)

The Planetree Model of Hospital Care, the pioneering leader in patient-centered care since 1978, is now adopted by 280 healthcare organizations in 20 countries. Behavioral care units at Planetree sites are housed in healing, homelike environments which are intended to “PhD”, Personalize, Humanize and Deinstitutionalize, the psychiatric care setting. (7)

**Basis of Design for a Trauma-Based Recovery Program Facility**

The architect for the Courage House Model, Stafford King Wiese Architects, reviewed research findings and worked extensively with the staff and residents at Courage House Northern California Safe House to identify what makes a residential setting a healing environment.

First and foremost the basis of all design decisions is “Safety First!” Starting with the organization of spaces down to the detailing of hardware and furnishings, everything must not work against staff feeling safe and residents being protected from harming themselves. Appropriate levels of visual supervision of resident spaces and the ability for staff to intervene is a basic requirement. Implementation of the recommendations in Mental Health Design Guidelines is essential. All design elements must be evaluated in light of safety before they are adopted. (8)

Second, the homelike design of Courage House facilitates connections between residents and caregivers; residents’ connections to social support networks, nature, a larger community and society, and to one’s own progression through life, all of which are of recognized importance to health and recovery. (9)

Third, the residential design also provides residents with privacy; ability to exercise choice and control; and opportunities to participate in, and take a measure of control of their own treatment. S. Leonard Syme, of the UC Berkeley School of Public Health stated it succinctly, “unless people can, in some way, create, manage, change, or participate in activities that affect their lives, dissatisfaction, alienation, and even illness are likely outcomes.” (10)

“The design [of Courage House] is forward thinking, supportive, and incorporates needed safety and utilitarian needs for both staff and client. It is environmentally sound and takes advantage of changes of architectural design that allow for the healing process to occur.

—Dr. Benjamin Keyes, Director of Trauma Studies-Regent University; Mental Health Consultant to Courage Worldwide Inc.
At Courage House residents participate in developing their own Unique Life Plan and Individual Safety Plan. They are encouraged to personalize their private bedrooms with artwork and furnishings and choose their own clothing. Individual gardens are provided to each resident to plant as they like.

Finally, successful treatment is based on trust between residents and caregivers. The design reflects this concern with the elimination of unnecessary barriers between residents and caregivers and the provision of a variety of spaces where staff and residents can interact both formally and informally, much like a family.

**Specific Design Features**

**Secluded Campus**

Courage House Northern California is on a 50-acre site in a rural area. Courage House Worldwide suggests that when looking to replicate the House on other properties, a minimum of 30 acres is necessary to implement the program.

A rural location sequesters the girls away from easy reach of their trafficker and/or pimp. A remote location also reduces flight risk by making flight more difficult and removes the girls from environmental “triggers” that can regress therapeutic advances as well as lure girls back to their prior lifestyle.

The full Courage House program, for the most part, is provided on-site to foster a girl's identification with a community with a shared purpose - helping her find her true identity and destiny following a journey of healing. Having facilities for the entire program on one site, including various therapeutic models, such as equine therapy and an extensive menu of recreational therapy, necessitates a larger site plan.

A campus layout also mimics an ordinary neighborhood facilitating eventual re-integration to society. Pathways connecting resident houses, community spaces, School House, Spiritual Refuge, Administration Buildings, and gathering places create a community. The campus is a well ordered and organized environment necessary for these girls to find the courage to confront the chaos of their past. A study of Nordic residential units found that optimal levels of order-and-organization were of importance for resident satisfaction.[11]

**Cottage Housing**

A campus provides space for building independent living units – separate houses for a “family” of six girls and resident staff. Separation of houses allows for access control between these resident units to improve safety. Groups of six are the preferred density that allows for adequate personal space and a family milieu. This manageable group size increases a girl’s sense of security. Studies show a smaller group also leads to reductions in vandalism, theft, and acting out by residents and increased feelings of belonging, competence, and satisfaction on the part of staff.[12]
Private Bedrooms

Each resident at Courage House has her own bedroom. "Providing individual bedrooms (with private bathrooms) may be the most important design intervention for reducing stress and thereby aggression in psychiatric settings."\(^{(13)}\) At Courage House, the girls are encouraged to personalize and decorate their private bedroom. However, due to a limited construction budget, the cottages are designed for three girls to share a bathroom. Studies have correlated multi-bed rooms with increased social withdrawal, a loss of sense of control, and more arguments between residents. There is some evidence that more negative behaviors happen in private rooms, but they are less harmful.

Exercise, Outdoor Activity, and Access to Nature

As part of its holistic treatment program, Courage House has a robust program of physical activities including notably Equine Assisted Therapy. In addition to the calming effect of physical exercise, the non-competitive sports activities at Courage House build confidence and promote healthy self-esteem.

Acreage in the Courage House model is devoted to stables, riding trails, playing fields and indoor and outdoor exercise studios. Nature infuses the campus plan and every building has views to a healing natural landscape. A study of children with ADD found they function better after activity in natural settings,\(^{(14)}\) which is particularly relevant as ADD and PTSD have a similar symptomology.

Girls can freely use the benches and chairs distributed around the campus to find solitude or gather informally. These outdoor options increase the sense of choice and control for the residents. Being able to be outdoors reduces stress and improves emotional well-being.\(^{(15)}\)

Daylight, Views of Nature

Higher levels of daylight exposure reduce depression and improve mood.\(^{(16)}\) Views of nature foster rapid reduction of stress, lower anxiety and anger, and increase positive moods.\(^{(16)(17)}\)

Residents of Courage House benefit from all spaces having an exterior exposure which allows for large windows to fill spaces with daylight and provide views of the surrounding landscape. All buildings are set apart to allow this and designed with a high exterior wall to interior space ratio, i.e. eliminating completely internal resident spaces with only artificial lighting.

Spirituality

Healing the spirit is a central tenet of the Courage House program. Spirituality imbues life with the sense of coherence, referenced in Salutogenesis Theory, necessary for good emotional and physical health. Finding the comforting, guiding voice within oneself requires time spent alone and with others necessitating a variety of spaces for meditation, contemplation, prayer and congregational gatherings.
The importance of spirituality at Courage House is symbolized by the placement of the Chapel at the center, or “heart,” of the campus plan. This Chapel is truly an “atrium” for the plan signaling the centrality of spirituality to the healing community and of a positive belief system to the achievement of healing and total health. Residents at Courage House have imagined one day getting married in the chapel.

“Turf”
Like abandoned lots in a neighborhood, spaces in a building or on a campus that do not “belong” to anyone are sites for anti-social and negative behaviors. A study of a children’s psychiatric facility discovered that when a space is orphaned, i.e. no one feels they have ownership of the space, it becomes a location for acting-out, aggression, and conflict.\(^{(18)}\)

Furthermore, ownership of space should be clearly recognizable with clear territorial designations. The number of large shared spaces should be limited to avoid violent conflict between residents.\(^{(19)}\)

The Courage House plan achieves these goals by eliminating corridors and replacing them with outdoor pathways visible to all staff and residents.

**Environmental Complexity**
Research has shown that an environment with greater complexity is correlated with reduced depression and social withdrawal in certain psychiatric patients.\(^{(20)}\) Similarly, a variety of spaces and “multiple sensory retreats” in a building are important for emotional and cognitive functioning.\(^{(21)}\)

Courage House completely deinstitutionalizes the behavioral healthcare setting with a sensory rich, homelike environment. Like a home, spaces have a variety of sizes and shapes with varied furnishings, lighting levels and views to the outside. This level of personalization would be difficult to achieve in a traditional institutional setting.

**The Wall of Courage**
To achieve coherence in their life, residents need to believe in themselves.\(^{(22)}\) Their personal transformation takes courage and happens through therapy and community activities.

The physical environment at Courage House also acts to encourage girls in their courageous transformation. The Wall of Courage spirals around the Campus linking the cottages into a community plan. On this wall, niches hold artwork made by previous residents with messages of encouragement. Girls at Courage House can see that they, like those before them, can succeed in recovering. The wall creates a feeling of connection to a larger community of Courage House graduates.

**Conclusion - Further Research**
Courage Worldwide is building a prototype of the Courage House Model in Northern California based on the research and design responses discussed in this paper. Concurrently, Dr. Vanessa Snyder, Dean of Clinical Affairs at Richmont Graduate University is conducting a five-year longitudinal study measuring the effects of the trauma model of treatment at Courage House on survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Preliminary results point
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to long-term care for adolescents of commercial sexual exploitation in a homelike setting as the best practice for treatment.

Over the course of two years, the study has discovered the adolescent population of those who have been trafficked show the most significant response to treatment at 18-24 months for symptoms such as PTSD and anxiety. Depression symptoms reduce significantly at the 6-9 month marker. After living at Courage House eighteen to twenty-four months, the following outcomes have been documented:

- 71% did not return to the world of trafficking.
- 86% remained in school.
- 100% increased their GPA in school to 3.0 or above.
- 78% of mental health symptoms were stabilized.
- 29% have jobs.
- Zero have gotten pregnant.
- Zero have had any law enforcement encounters.

Research on the direct correlation between the homelike character and specific residential design elements to the success of treatment will be included in the further development of the study design. The hypothesis of the importance of the physical setting to treatment outcomes will be tested comparing results from the current clinical setting to the new, purpose-built Courage House.
Footnotes


(2) Dr. Benjamin Keyes, Director of Trauma Studies at Regent University and mental health consultant to Courage Worldwide.


(4) Dr. Vanessa Snyder, Dean of Clinical Affairs, Richmont Graduate University


(8) Recommended guidelines include:


VA Mental Health Environment of Care Checklist, VHA National Center for Patient Safety, Department of Veterans Affairs. VA Mental Health Facilities Design Guide, Department of Veterans Affairs, OCFM, October 2014


For additional research into the impact of environmental design on health and treatment outcomes see the following:

