

Front façade of the addition to Bread for the City, with metal screen/sign.



Photo © John Cole

More Bread for the City:

Social Services Organization Adds to Historic Structure

by Steven K. Dickens, AIA, LEED AP

Ever wonder where the billions of dollars of the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement went? Here in D.C., we need look no further than the large addition that **Wiebenson & Dorman Architects** designed for the social services organization Bread for the City (BFC). “Somebody’s misery paid off,” joked **Kendall Dorman**, noting how far his firm was able to stretch the \$6.8 million budget, most of which came from the tobacco settlement.

In 1991, BFC, which offers a food bank, legal services, and medical services, moved into the former Barker Lumber Warehouse on 7th Street, NW, in the heart of D.C.’s Shaw neighborhood. Wiebenson & Dorman, already noted for their many projects for nonprofits, oversaw the conversion of the historic building. Subsequently, BFC called on the architects for periodic expansion studies and small alterations to the 7th Street building, as well as the renovation of a structure in Anacostia to accommodate BFC’s Southeast Center, which opened in 2002.

Project: Bread for the City,
Washington, DC

Architects: **Wiebenson & Dorman Architects PC**

MEP Engineers: **S3E Klingemann, Inc.**

Structural Engineers: **JGK Structural Engineers**

Specifications: **Heller & Metzger, PC**

Contractor: **Turner Construction Company**

A strong architect-client relationship formed over the years. “These are the kinds of projects one wants,” reflects Dorman, “because the client is passionate about what they do, so they understand when I’m passionate about what I do. My passion is to make a cool space so that these great people can do their best.”

In 2004, BFC applied for and was granted \$5,000,000 of DC’s portion of the national tobacco settlement money. Supplementing these funds with \$1,800,000 in New Markets Tax Credits, the organization set to undertake a substantial expansion of the 7th Street facility, and naturally called upon Wiebenson & Dorman once again.

The basic organization of the addition is simple: a glassy atrium is sandwiched between two solid volumes—the old lumber warehouse and the new clinic building. This set up a “separate but equal” massing that preserved the visual integrity of the historic structure, a fact that was crucial to

winning approval from the DC Historic Preservation Review Board (the existing building is an officially designated historic place). The double-height atrium houses the main front and rear entrances, reception, and vertical circulation (an elevator and open stair), with direct entrances to the medical/dental clinic, the legal clinic, the food bank, board room, social services, and administration.

Social services organizations tend to be high on aspiration but rather low on budget. The architects’ strategy was to make the most of the limited resources available. Toward that end, the interiors are in a “loft” style, in which the necessities of structure, ducts, piping, cable conduits, and the like are exposed and painted white. They become the “ornament” of the space. The entire former exterior brick wall of the lumber warehouse building is exposed as the north wall of the atrium. Its solidity is offset by the glassiness of the end walls of the atrium, and balanced by the exposed concrete block elevator tower.

Another strategy was to choose a visually prominent element and highlight it with an unusual (but still inexpensive) material, such as the perforated metal panels used as guardrails on the atrium stairs and balconies. The elevator tower is another example: concrete block is a very economical material for an elevator shaft, but for only slightly more money, the architects were able to specify block with a special color, texture, and pattern.



Lobby of Bread for the City, with elevator shaft in background at right.



Administrative space in the new wing of Bread for the City.

Photo © John Cole

Color is important throughout the project, but used sparingly both for reasons of economy and effect. This starts with the streetfront windows, which have alternating green and blue tints. It continues with the surprisingly bold green linoleum flooring and carpet tiles, and accent walls painted green, blue, or gold, including one wall of each medical exam room. Doors and simple pieces of custom millwork, such as bookshelves, are natural, warm wood tones. Because most of the interiors are white, the colors add “pop” and distinction to the spaces.

As an organization with high ethical aspirations, BFC was strongly interested in green design. Unfortunately, pursuing an official LEED certification would have involved modest increases in hard costs and considerable additional soft-cost expenses, both of which are particularly difficult for tight-budget projects to bear. BFC and Wiebenson & Dorman decided to incorporate numerous sustainable elements but to forgo the formal review and certification process. The sustainable elements used are mostly the basics: well-insulated exterior walls; conventional but very high-efficiency HVAC systems; “green” finish materials

such as the linoleum flooring and carpeting; low-flow plumbing fixtures, and so on. One unusual sustainable element is the vegetated (“green”) roof, unusual because its plantings are intended to produce fresh vegetables for BFC’s food bank clients.

Since occupying the space in January, BFC reports overwhelmingly positive responses from its employees and clients. The new clinic “simply seems more real” to the patients, reports BFC’s Kristin Valentine, alluding to the move from the cramped, dark facility in the old lumber warehouse, “which sends a message of respect to our clients.” She also notes that, although the new clinic already operates at full capacity, the stress of the doctors and staff has dropped considerably, due to wider corridors, better organized administrative and reception areas, access to natural light and outdoor views, and more exam rooms.

BFC’s motto is “Dignity, Respect, and Service,” and, according to the organization’s president, George Jones, “This space allows us to realize our motto.” He added, “This is largely Kendall Dorman’s vision,” immediately correcting himself to say, “Well, *our* vision, but brought to life and within budget by Kendall.”