

Bellevue Hospital Center

New face for oldest hospital in the country

by Mary Beth Sammons

When 10,000 people a day in need of medical care can't find the front door to the hospital, there's a problem.

Just ask Robert Walsh.

As the project team manager for the \$178 million major modernization of the nation's oldest hospital — Bellevue Hospital Center in New York City — Walsh's job is to put a new face on this 267-year-old medical powerhouse. More important, he needs to help the medical needy find their way to the front door.

"Bellevue is supposed to be the gateway to hospital row along First Avenue in Manhattan, but no one can find the front door," said Walsh, director for health and hospitals for the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York. DASNY is overseeing the construction of a five-story, 207,000-sq.-ft. ambulatory care center on First Avenue and the remodeling of 136,000 sq. ft. of space in the main building, directly behind the new building.

The culprit: a multistory parking garage that was erected in front of the main door to the hospital years ago, which literally sealed up Bellevue's front entrance — an archway and doorway — and forced hospital visitors to enter around the block through a smaller door on FDR Boulevard. This parking dinosaur had become an eyesore and source of frequent complaints from New Yorkers, and the first step to the modernization project was its demolition, Walsh added.

Phillip Robinson, vice president of facilities development for New York's Health and Hospitals Corp., said the garage had become a logistical night-



Top: Bellevue Hospital will undergo a \$178 million major modernization.

Right: A rendering of the new entrance lobby for Bellevue.



mare, and "our job was to re-create this grand gateway to our campus."

HHC and DASNY called on the pros — the architectural firm of Pei, Cobb & Freed Partners — to put a new face on this historical giant whose annals tell the history of the development of American medicine.

"Here we have the hospital with the largest emergency room in the country, the hospital where all the police and fire

professionals are treated in times of disaster, and there is no signage or directions to the front of this historic building," said Richard Cutter, associate partner and a project architect for Pei and the Bellevue.

"The whole historical significance issue became centerpiece to our plans from day one. It was essential to recreate that excitement and draw people to this unique locality and monument to

About Bellevue

- 26,500 inpatients a year.
- 489,000 ambulatory care and ambulatory surgery visits.
- 89,000 emergency department visits.
- Ambulatory care for 300,000 patient visits in more than 90 adult and pediatric ambulatory care clinics.
- It has grown from six beds to more than 1,000.
- It serves as the medical facility for dignitaries visiting New York City, including the U.S. president and diplomats from the United Nations.

our country's medical history."

The natural solution would have been to plant a park on the site of the razed parking garage to create "an open entryway" to Bellevue, but with plans calling for the addition of a major new ambulatory center, space was limited, Cutter said.

The solution: a 15,000-sq.-ft. atrium lobby for the ambulatory center. What's most unique about this 300-ft.-long atri-

um stretching over a city block was the use of glass from floor to ceiling. That allows passersby to look through the atrium and see the original Bellevue entrance, whose archway and façade have been restored to when it was opened in 1736, Cutter said.

Skylights also punctuate the ceiling, giving the atrium "almost a park-like feeling," he added.

Construction on the Bellevue proj-

ect began in October 2000 with the excavation of the parking garage. It's scheduled to be complete by the end of 2004.

In addition to the ambulatory care building, which will house the hospital's outpatient clinics, renovation is under way on 48,000 sq. ft. of space in the main building for critical care units and another 90,000 sq. ft. for renovated medical/surgical units. The building's mechanical system also is being upgraded.

"Thirty years of neglect and no upgrades to the mechanical and heating systems and the fire alarm system also are posing a lot of challenges for us," Walsh said. "And the philosophy before of having larger hospital rooms and renovating that to two-bed units is a challenge in an older building."

Robinson said that when construction is complete, "We will celebrate our new direction for the 21st Century. That is what Bellevue represents, the old and the new."

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