

A Stryking Center

On North Boundary Street in Williamsburg, Virginia stands a municipal building that was recently reimagined, transforming a dull and deteriorating relic into an integrative and illuminating landmark that responded to a unique design prompt drafted by the city: a high-tech facility that could house an expanding community while honoring the heritage of Williamsburg. This undertaking posed an exquisite challenge to architects Edwin J. Pease and David M. Stemann, who sought to construct a modern site that reflected civic integrity and productivity *and* complemented the colonial aesthetic of its anachronistic surroundings.

“Form follows function.” This rallying cry of the early 20th-century Modernist movement, a maxim originally coined by architect Louis H. Sullivan, is embraced by Pease and Stemann’s reinterpretation of the Stryker Center (built in 1967). From a single glance at the current center, you can recognize the telltale markers of Modernism: clean, minimal lines partition the length of the entrance, a wall of glass welcomes in natural light, a spacious and well-defined floor plan promotes accessibility and visibility, and the facade’s asymmetrical medley of shapes spark visual interest without ornamentation (Thomann). It is evident that these features, as Sullivan’s apt axiom dictates, closely conform to the architects’ intent: to encourage trust and transparency in public institutions (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, in Pease and Stemann’s reconstruction of the original Stryker Center, they re-introduced ideas akin to the ones expressed in the Industrial Revolution during the mid 19th century. The Revolution sparked a major overhaul of physical and aesthetic engineering, and novel structures like ‘traffic buildings’ and reception halls began to reflect the “multiplied productivity” brought about by this era of technological innovation; Stemann and Pease resurface

these very themes by deliberately making their design intersectional, tugging on many stylistic and structural threads that enhance and diversify the Stryker Center's appeal (Schivelbusch 45).

In their mission to architecturally bridge the gap between residents and their local government, Pease and Stemann breathed new life into the outdated Stryker Center – and the city of Williamsburg – by invoking three cardinal principles that we have learned from key figures and works in Modernist discourse: the interplay of light and glass, an 'honest' use of mixed materials, and keen attention to town planning.

As repeated above, transparency was the *parti* that governed the building's design, both symbolically and physically: "It was both a metaphor for how Williamsburg sees government and this idea of being connected to the people in town literally" (Langley). Light, particularly natural light, offered a means to this end. A generous use of glass was applied throughout the building, lining walls, workrooms, and even the roof: a clerestory runs along the entire east-west corridor capturing sunlight and guiding it into the internal organs of the center. Moreover, Pease and Stemann administered a controlled dose of sunlight, an often unruly and capricious element, to the council chamber without blinding it; the strategic orientation of the building assures that the chamber is only directly lit in the mornings, conveniently before council business begins (Langley).

The function of light and windows is meant for the interior as much as it is for the exterior: the architects tried to provide as many views *out* of the building as possible, too. In fact, there is a special spot where one can see clear through the building, from the council chamber in the far east all the way to the parking lot in the west, like a shot (Langley) (see Figure 2). Though Pease and Stemann delivered on their promise of transparency, their use of glass affords privacy to the more sensitive and secure side of municipal operations, too. Frosted glass, panels

with opacity gradients, and blinds guard the chamber and interior offices, protecting the confidentiality of government affairs without disrupting the building's translucent motif.

Stemann and Pease further magnified the statement of their building by careful selection of material. The original Stryker building was a brick box with classical limestone trim and a central columned entrance – a dated look from the fifties that, according to an article in *Mid-Century Mundane*, showed the “slow pace of modern architecture in this bastion of Colonial Revival design” (“Stryker Building”). The newer Stryker building, a blend of Georgian and Modernist visual vocabulary, offers a refreshing reversal of this trend, using a diverse palette of brick, precast concrete, and glass. The red brick that runs along the building's sides is interrupted by accent walls of white concrete and stacked columns that frame the Stryker's main entrance. The floor-to-ceiling glass windows wrap around the center and are neatly divided by silver trim.

Though unconventional, the eclectic assemblage of materials is authentically displayed; in other words, the “building blocks” of the Stryker are bare and undisguised – a nod to Eugene Viollet-le-Duc's belief that the honest expression of materials and the influence of the modern age were architecturally compatible. Of course, there was some concern and criticism directed towards the architects' decision to rebuild the Stryker's as more contemporary than colonial: “One of the challenges of doing something that's different, innovative and on the edge is that you take some chances, and some people won't enjoy that” (Langley).

Upon closer examination, you can appreciate the fact that the design of the Stryker is very rational and functional, rather than arbitrary. This point leads me to my final consideration of the revamped Stryker building: town planning. The redesign of the Stryker building ushered in a wave of changes around the locality that emphasized outdoor interaction and community fellowship, visions that were echoed in Ebenezer Howard's Town-Country model. According to

an article in *WY Daily*, the City Square, flanked by the Williamsburg Regional Library and the Stryker Center, received a facelift that involved expanding the stretch of green lawn, installation of a fountain, and construction of a wisteria-covered trellis (see Figure 3).

The transformation of the City Square into a public park seemed like an intuitive one: “As the lawn has gradually become more and more popular for events and library programming, the city has identified a need to streamline and better organize the process of hosting events at that location” (Fearing). Three vertices of suburban life – the Library, the Community Building, and the Stryker Center – triangulate a common plaza, a recognizable and inviting area for residential recreation.

Pease and Stemann’s Stryker Center is built more to serve than merely to last, as many buildings in Colonial Williamsburg are: “What it allows us to do in the quality of our council meetings, the broadcast and the experience of the public who view meetings live, and allows us to do with the gallery space and bringing different types of art and different traveling library exhibitions, and what it does as a community gathering point with all of those meeting rooms – it’s just a great asset” (Langley). From mundane to modern, the Stryker Center embodies three fundamental tenets of Modernism: sleek and functional design, versatility and veracity in materials, and strong relationship to the outside locale.



Fig. 1. New Stryker Building from: Stephen Salpukas. “When Inspiration Strykes.” *William & Mary*, 14 July 2016, n.p.



Fig. 2. Interior Hallway from: Stephen Salpukas. “When Inspiration Strykes.” *William & Mary*, 14 July 2016, n.p.



Fig. 3. A View of City Square from: City of Williamsburg. “So Here's the Deal on Why the City Made the Lawn next to the Library a Public Park.” *Williamsburg Yorktown Daily*, 15 Aug. 2019,

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