



**PROJECT** New Residences, Richmond State School, Richmond  
**CLIENT** Texas Department of Mental Health & Mental Retardation  
**ARCHITECT** Taft Architects  
**CONTRACTOR** Bass Construction  
**CONSULTANTS** Jackson & Ryan Architects (consulting architect); Matrix Structural Engineers (structural); Smith Seckman Reid (MEP); Karen Rose Engineering (civil)  
**PHOTOGRAPHER** Hester + Hardaway; Taft Architects

# A New Model for Group Living

by BEN KOUSH

THE RICHMOND STATE SCHOOL, ADMINISTERED by the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation (TDMHMR), is one of 11 facilities around the state housing the mentally retarded. Located in Fort Bend County, just southwest of Houston, it's sited on the former Vaclav Pultar farm, a bucolic parcel along a bend in the Brazos River north of the town of Richmond. Taft Architects of Houston has designed a new project on the state school's 242-acre campus, a small housing complex that sets a bold precedent for institutional living.

Taft's housing complex sits in stark contrast to the campus' original residential buildings, built



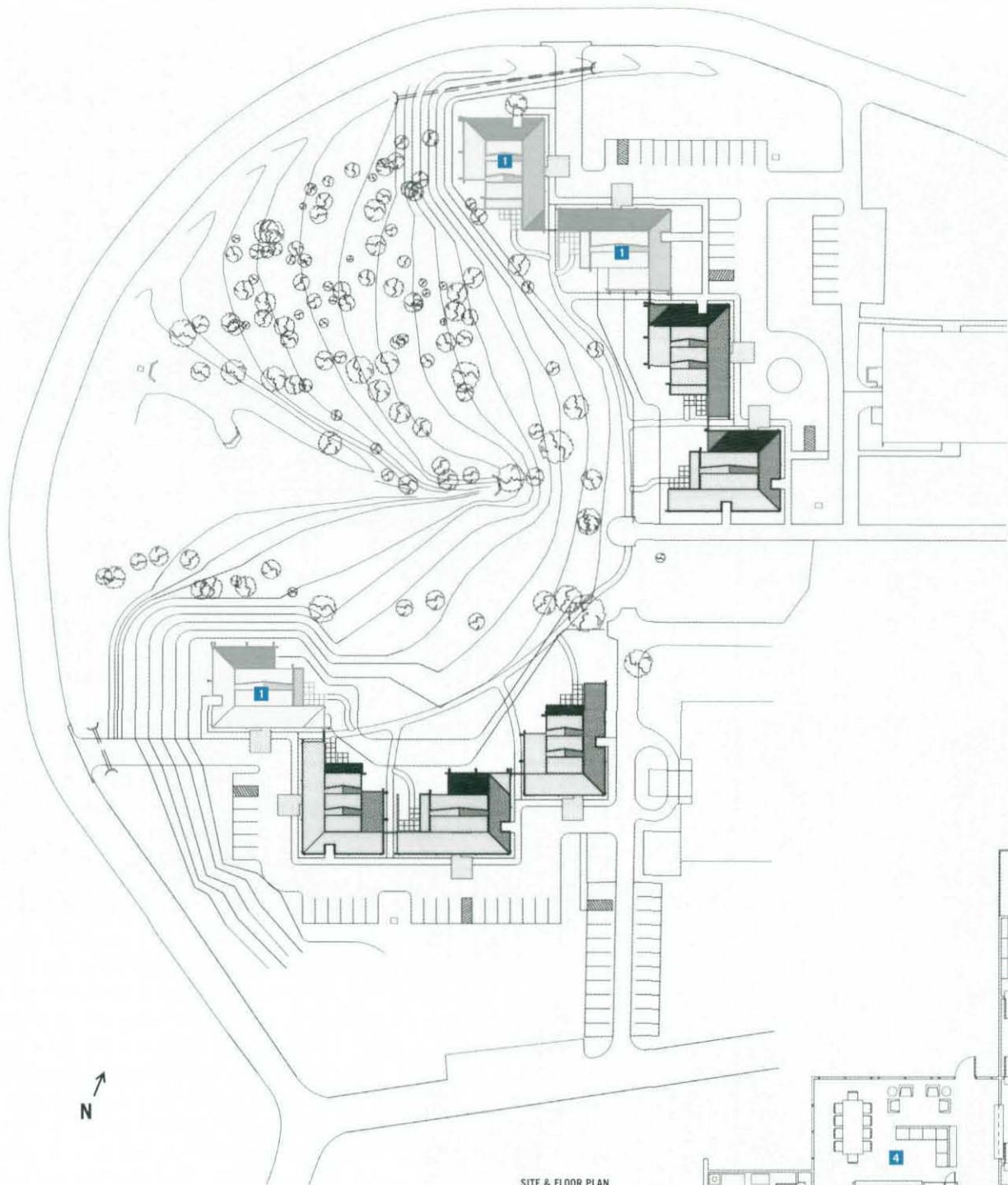
(opposite page) Auto traffic is relegated to the outside edge of the complex, providing the cottages with a quiet communal backyard; photo by Taft Architects. (this page) Large gang-nailed trusses support north-facing skylights; photo by Hester and Hardaway.

from 1965 to 1968 and designed in a quasi-Brutalist mode by Golemon & Rolfe of Houston (best remembered for the Houston Intercontinental Airport of 1969). The new project is comprised of five cottages organized in a scheme reminiscent of Aldo Van Eyck's Amsterdam Orphanage of 1960—an array of self-contained living units set along "interior streets." Van Eyck invoked the imagery of a traditional town plan to foster a sense of community among the residents.

Like Van Eyck's orphanage, Taft's prototype residential complex was a public-funded experiment aimed at improving living conditions for wards of the state. And like most other experimental government projects, Taft's original idea — two adjacent assemblages of four cottages, each thoughtfully arranged to create a protected area of wheelchair-accessible green space — did not survive intact its journey through the bureaucracy. Budget constraints, as well as the vociferous demands of protective parents, steadily chipped away at the clarity of Taft's concept. The result is a project diminished by the state's decision to omit three of the planned eight cottages, an alteration to the prototype's original program which eliminated the cottage's articulate relationships to each other and the site.

When opened in April 1968, the Richmond State School housed nearly 2,000 residents — known as "clients," most of whom were under 21 — and 650 staff personnel. Currently, the state school houses 546 clients — whose average age is 43 — and 1,450 staff. The reduction in the number of clients is explained by the declining number of children born with mental retardation due to improved medical and pre-natal care. Policy changes subsequently adopted by the TDMHMR have played an equally significant role in the reduced number of clients housed in state institutions. Unlike its policy in the 1960s, TDMHMR today advocates that mentally retarded children remain in the care of their families rather than being placed in institutions. According to Claire Chipman, the school's public relations director, most of the facility's new clients were raised by their parents who are now too old to care for them. Chipman suggested that one reason the TDMHMR decided to fund this experimental project was to provide an appealing, domestically scaled environment for clients who have never before been institutionalized.

Taft originally envisioned eight 3,900-square-foot cottages housing eight clients each. The cottages



- SITE & FLOOR PLAN**
- 1 UNBUILT BUILDINGS
  - 2 BEDROOM - SINGLE
  - 3 BEDROOM - DOUBLE
  - 4 LIVING/DINING
  - 5 KITCHEN
  - 6 ACTIVITIES
  - 7 STUDY
  - 8 OFFICE
  - 9 LAUNDRY
  - 10 STORAGE
  - 11 MECHANICAL





(top) The jagged roofline and choice of materials differentiates the cottages from the older buildings and create a sense of community; photo by Hester + Hardaway. (bottom) Because of the overhead lighting, even areas with no exterior windows seem light and airy; photo by Taft Architects.



contained a combination of single and double bedrooms and baths wrapped around a central living area with a "tail" at one end for storage and mechanical rooms. According to Taft's Danny Samuels, FAIA, he and partner John Casbarian, FAIA, divided the program into small cottages "to provide a sense of dignity, community belonging, and individual privacy"—and despite the extraordinarily low budget (\$98 per square foot), it's within the interior communal living areas that the architects were able to focus their attention. The ceiling is composed of large north-facing saw-tooth skylights supported by exposed wooden trusses. Taft chose skylights, Samuels said, to provide inexpensive lighting that would illuminate the interiors evenly and efficiently.

The outward appearance of the cottages — with dark-red brick walls extending past the building edges and gigantic sets of tall saw-tooth skylights — sharply contrasts with the red-orange brick and low, green copper mansard roofs of the campus' existing residential blocks. The visual distinction is all the more appropriate considering the major break in policy the cottages represent. Taft designed the cottages to look even more distinctive but budget constraints forced the substitution of several significant exterior materials. While Taft originally specified corrugated galvalume for the roofs and walls facing the grove, those surfaces are now clad with brown composite shingles and hardi-plank siding. These substitutions of materials have further transformed the once-cohesive collection of intimately scaled cottages into what now appears to be five conventional yet over-sized suburban ranch houses.

Although the project as built can be termed only a qualified success, the state school reports that morale has improved dramatically among both the clients living in the cottages and the staff assigned there as caretakers. Taft's prototype, even after many alterations in program and specification, may prove over time to be a good model for the TDMHMR to employ in the future. ■

Ben Koush recently earned his Master of Architecture from Rice University.

**RESOURCES** MASONRY UNITS: Boral; PRE-FABRICATED WOOD JOISTS AND TRUSSES: All-Pan; LAMINATES: Wilsonart; WATERPROOFING AND DAMPPROOFING: WR Grace; BUILDING INSULATION: Johns Manville; SHINGLES: GAF; SIDING: James Hardie; WOOD AND PLASTIC DOORS AND FRAMES: VT Industries; METAL WINDOWS: Alenco; GYPSUM BOARD FRAMING AND ACCESSORIES: USG; TILE: DalTile; WALL COVERINGS: Kydex; PAINTS: Sherwin-Williams