

PROJECT DATA

NAME OF PROJECT The Mothership

TYPE OF PROJECT Shelter, transitional housing, and offices for unhoused youth

PROJECT SIZE 66,578 SF

COST PER SQUARE FOOT \$405.79

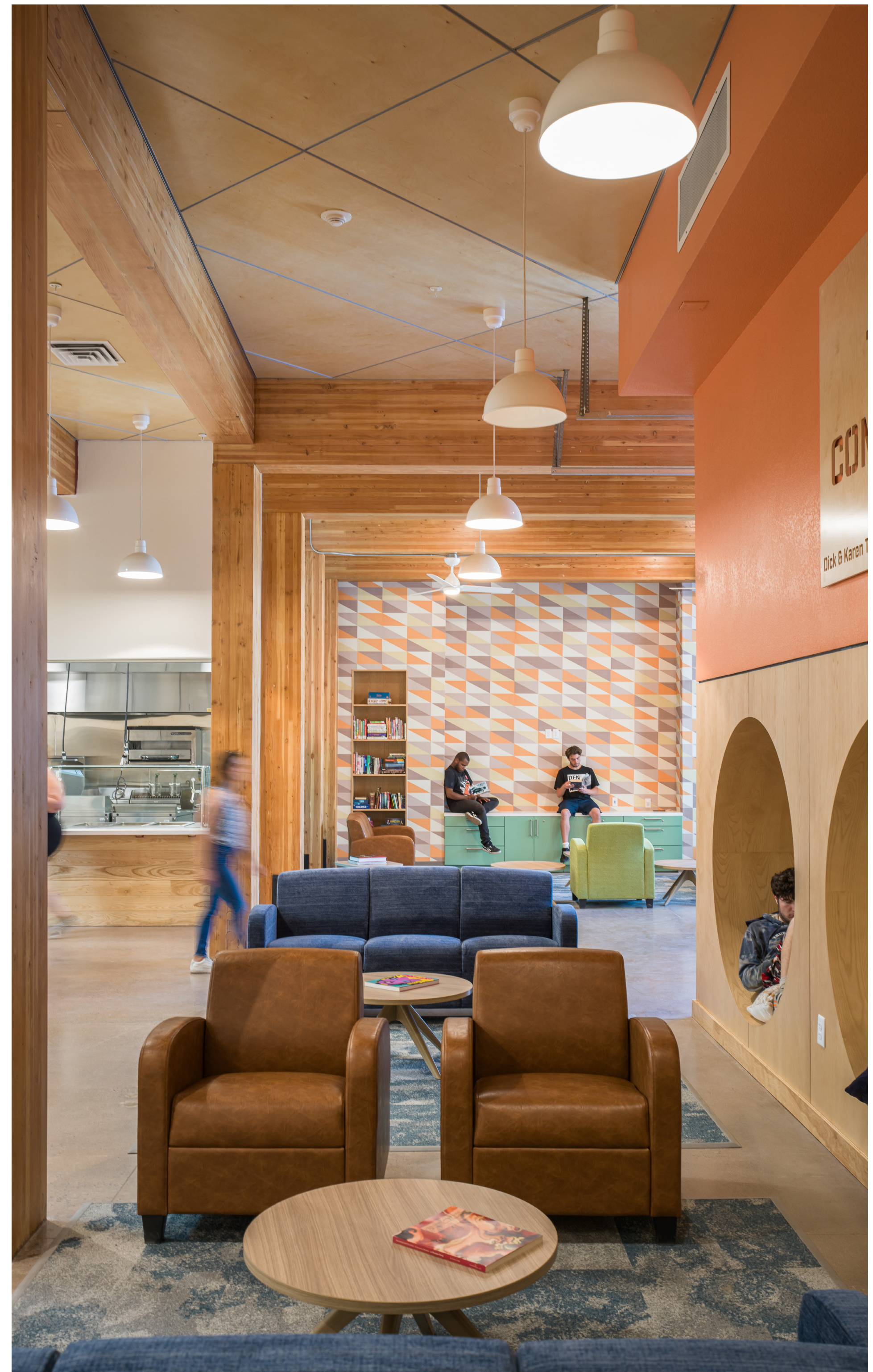
OVERALL CONSTRUCTION COST \$27,016,982

PROGRAM SUMMARY The Mothership is an innovative campus designed over the past 10 years that allows Urban Peak to live fully into its mission of offering youth a safe place to heal and thrive. The Mothership campus co-locates shelter, transitional housing, and supportive services (case management, physical/behavioral healthcare, education/employment services, and life-skills). Offering a total of 136 shelter beds, Mothership tripled Urban Peak's former shelter capacity, expanding shelter services to support minors as young as 12 and older youth up to 24 who could not be served overnight in the previous shelter. To fill a glaring gap between shelter and housing The Mothership provides a transitional step for youth between the stabilization of a shelter bed and long-term, independent housing that can be unaffordable or plagued by long waiting lists. At Mothership, supported by staff and situated in a neighborhood of peers learning similar skills, youth can safely learn and grow, preparing themselves for the transition from homelessness to self-determined, fulfilled lives.

The ground floor of the building is the campus center, including shelter and community rooms, a teaching kitchen, the medical clinic, case management offices and an enclosed outdoor courtyard. The second and third floors feature distinct and separate neighborhoods where Urban Peak can serve diverse and unique subpopulations based on their shared needs. The Wellbeing Center on the fourth floor includes two outdoor terraces, a tech lab, visual arts center, recording studio, private meeting spaces for case management and counseling as well as community rooms for social-emotional classes and trainings.

PROJECT COMPLETION DATE July 25, 2024

PROJECT LOCATION 1630 S Acoma St, Denver, CO



PROJECT NARRATIVE

In 2024, Urban Peak opened a first-of-its-kind building in Denver called The Mothership, built to serve our community's most vulnerable youth. Serving more than 1,000 different youth annually, Urban Peak provides shelter and long-term housing, case management, medical and behavioral health services, and education and employment support. The Mothership unites these operations under one roof.

Discussions about renovating Urban Peak's existing aging shelter started in 2015, but conversations soon pivoted to a more comprehensive approach. We envisioned a place with progressive levels of housing where youth can transition quickly from emergency shelter into a more intimate and supported housing environment with peer and staff support—all with the goal of youth eventually graduating out of The Mothership into permanent housing. At the beginning and throughout the process we committed to a trauma-informed design approach, interviewing over 70 youth and staff across the organization to precisely understand their needs and desires for the building.

The design process invested close to 10 years workshoping ideas and iterating concepts. Every person on the team came to the table with passion, curiosity, and hope. With a shared set of values, everyone understood that the outcome—a new and improved model for serving resilient and capable unhoused youth—was worth the time and risks being taken.

The Mothership is a 4-story 66,000 SF building with an exposed glue-laminated structure and a large centrally located light court, providing a bright and biophilic experience throughout. A large, welcoming entry lobby welcomes guests and separates the space into two distinct emergency shelters: one serving minors (ages 12-17) with 20 beds and the other serving young adults (ages 18-24) with 32 beds. Each shelter includes varied community and dining spaces as well as a secured outdoor courtyard. A commercial kitchen provides daily meals to all guests, and a small, dedicated medical clinic offers youth direct access to healthcare professionals and services that are not otherwise easily accessible to unhoused youth.

The second and third floors of the building contain six "neighborhoods" totaling 84 beds (expandable if needed), providing longer term, semi-independent housing. The neighborhoods create small community-based cohorts whose needs can be served more directly. One neighborhood may be dedicated to supporting young parents while others focus on substance use recovery, or youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Each neighborhood has its own shared living and dining spaces, laundry, bike storage, community room, restrooms, dorm-style sleeping rooms, and case management office.

The fourth floor is comprised of administrative offices and the Wellbeing Center, inclusive of a technology lab, music studio, visual arts center, group therapy room, large community and training spaces, and case management rooms, flanked by two spacious outdoor terraces with planters, comfortable seating, and expansive solar panel shade structures.

The Mothership transcends traditional shelter into a dignified place of warmth, safety, and community. It breathes life and empowers both youth and staff to be the best version of themselves. Upon opening, Christina Carlson (the CEO) reflected, "It is so calm. We have experienced a culture shift overnight!"



FRAMEWORK FOR DESIGN EXCELLENCE NARRATIVE

DESIGN FOR INTEGRATION The integrated design for the Mothership balances five distinct programmatic elements (shelter, long-term housing, case management, medical/behavioral health services, and education and employment support) into a unified whole in a building typology that historically and inherently has been institutional. Mothership has sought to create a safe, youth-centered and youth-serving building that connects guests, staff and visitors holistically and without abundant restriction. Instead, safety is maintained by clear sight lines, presence of staff and kids, good access to daylight, acoustic modulation, access to courtyards and places to be social/alone.

The purpose of the project is to de-stigmatize and dignify the experience of youth homelessness. Every decision we made during the process was in service of that idea. The courtyards are each designed with different views, access to daylight/shade, physical activity (somatic release), temperature control, breezes and community. Every common space has a variety of spaces for introverts and extroverts – for loud community gatherings, and for small one-on-one case management sessions. We know that for youth to take steps on their paths towards stability the environment must help them regulate their bodies and meet their individual, unique needs. The project is the first of its kind nationally and will be preserved because the youth outcomes are extraordinary and the architecture is simply, joyful, and optimistic.



DESIGN FOR CHANGE Mothership provides Urban Peak a dynamic building with a broad diversity of spaces to meet the ever-evolving needs of youth experiencing homelessness. Flexibility in the design allows Urban Peak to offer a range of services focused on healing from past traumas, which impact present day mental, physical, and social health. The building offers a range of secure places where youth can just be, whether they are looking to socialize with others, relax in a quiet space, or engage with a trusted staff member. Employing a range of natural materials and charismatic features to support a rich and balanced sensory experience, the design seeks to promote a return from the body's natural stress response to a state of homeostasis and calm.

By designing a building to meet a broad diversity of uses today, and by offering diverse gathering spaces both indoor and outdoor – the building is set up to flex pending the diverse needs of youth and staff decades into the future. The building ensures that all youth in our community have access to safe housing and dignified services that help them heal and thrive, allowing them to move on from the difficulties of their past to lead fulfilled adult lives.

DESIGN FOR ENERGY The density and location of the project are inherently sustainable, and the project emphasizes the use of mass transit and bike/scooter access. On-site renewable energy creates shade on the terraces while energizing the building. Waste and water consumption are well managed, and when the alternatives of homelessness is considered, the building is ecologically extraordinary.

More specifically - in addition to providing clean energy for the building, the solar panels are integrally designed as trellis structures to provide essential shade and weather protection for the two outdoor rooftop terraces. The rooftop air handling units utilize energy recovery ventilator (ERV) technology that recover otherwise-expended energy to reduce the amount of energy needed for conditioning and ventilation. Cool roofs are installed throughout with white TPO to reduce the urban heat island effect and reduce the overall roof temperature. High performance insulation and windows are specified to minimize heat transfer. The building lighting is designed as all LED, with a reduced lighting power density (LPD) and occupancy/vacancy sensors throughout.



DESIGN FOR ECONOMY We designed for economy by creating a new approach to housing youth experiencing homelessness. This project directly addresses an urgent social need, reducing the need for hospital stays, incarceration, and chronic homelessness in our youth. This is clearly a moral imperative but is also an economic win for Denver and the region. The organization is now able to offer on-site mental and physical healthcare – allowing youth to rely upon primary care, and not the emergency room. As noted earlier, critical incident reports (calls to police and fire) are down 70% from the previous building.

Additionally, because this building was funded via donations and City resources, the design and development team were careful to make cost-effective design decisions, and proved that you can offer a beautiful, dignified, joyful building on a strict budget. By starting with a report on what the youth and staff needed, the team was able to prioritize where to invest significantly on building materials, and where cost-effective solutions were possible. As an example of how we thought about balancing the various needs of this project and prioritizing economic thinking – we utilized wood glulam beams and columns for the primary structural support at level one. While these provide necessary structure they are also a beautiful, biophilic centerpiece to the common spaces and offer a more sustainable solution than steel.

DESIGN FOR WELL-BEING Buildings play a key role in our day-to-day experience, wielding the power to harm or heal. Research on brain science notes that young people's brains have high plasticity, meaning interventions in the lives of youth have a significant impact on their brain development – and that their brains can heal from the trauma of homelessness much more quickly than adult brains. The development team understood this core concept, and committed themselves to not doing what was easy, but what was best for youth – while prioritizing the voices of youth in the design of the building to ensure it met their needs.

The building encourages youth to be active – with a basketball hoop, healthy food, and access to medical services on site. Comfort was a key driver in design – offering both calming and activating spaces for youth to release the stress of their daily lives and find joy in community.

The team's commitment to being a welcoming and inclusive place for all can be seen in each space within the building, and in the leap of faith the team took to create what youth said they needed – not the building that could be easily fundraised for. The sheer audacity of the development team having the courage to believe they could fundraise \$41 million for this building – and then doing it – shows the deep commitment to well-being across all players who made this project come to life.

DESIGN FOR EQUITABLE COMMUNITIES The heart of the Mothership is equity – the project de-stigmatizes youth homelessness and provides the support they need by listening to their voices to inform the design and services. The process of design removed barriers by asking questions and iterating with staff and youth. By carefully listening we were able to honor “lived experience” instead of designing to our bias as college-educated, upper middle-class designers with no experience living unhoused. The building provides safe and comfortable areas for all, whether an introvert, extrovert, long-time resident, new to the community, or staff member.

Additionally, the project assures that youth experiencing homelessness have access to a broad diversity of resources (physical and mental healthcare, case management, housing assistance, housing, food, life skills, etc...) under one roof. The building facilitates the opportunity to offer diverse services to diverse audiences by offering flexible space to meet a variety of needs. The project promotes human connection everywhere. The roommate shelter format is one key way, but the whole neighborhood concept reduces the scale of the building from 100's of unrelated kids to small communities of kids with deep relationships and social accountability. For example, single parents can live together in a neighborhood – learning from one another and sharing resources and support in a challenging time.



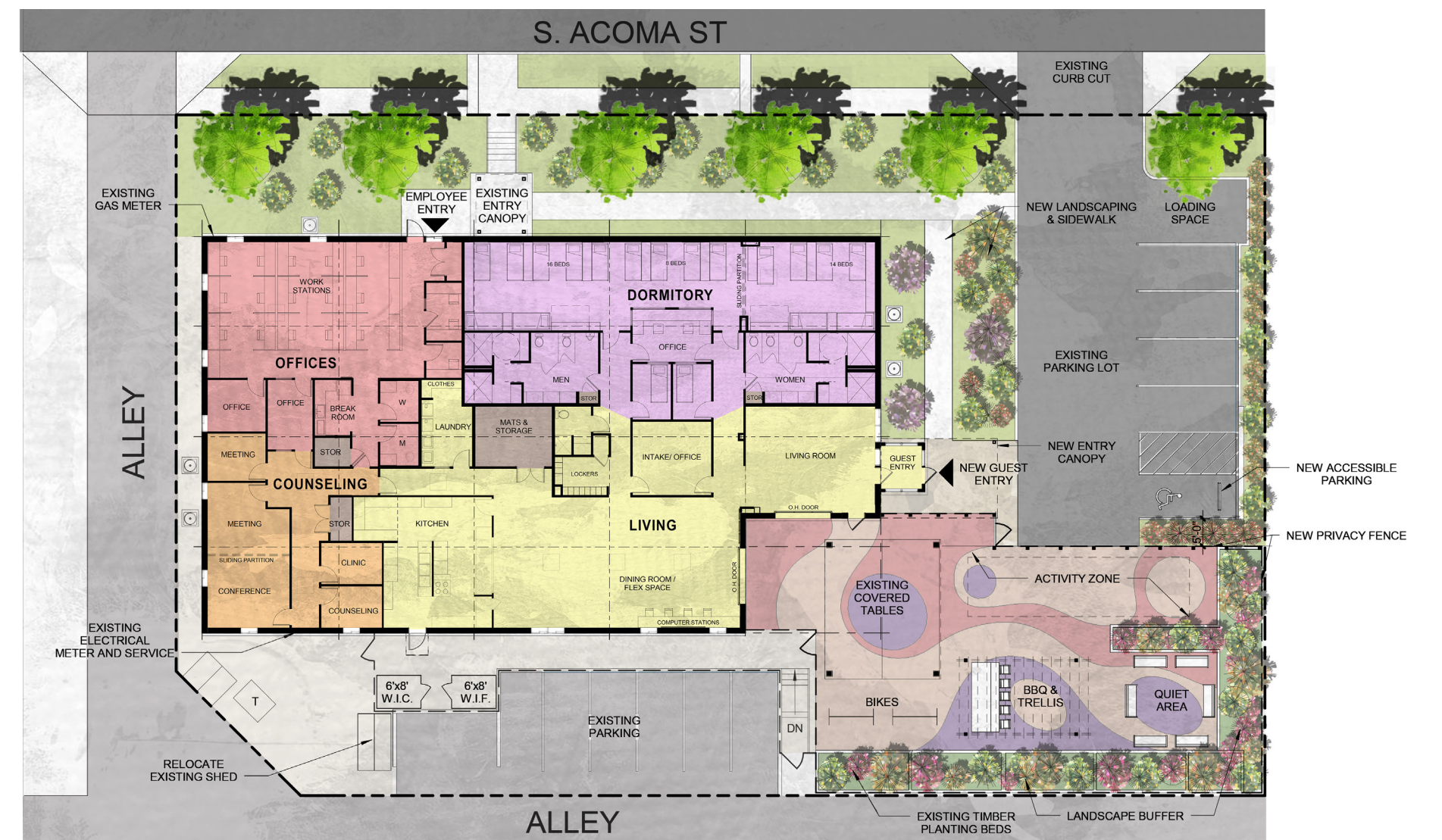
DESIGN FOR DISCOVERY The design process began in 2015 with the curiosity to ask “how can we design a support system for unhoused youth that promotes dignity, skill-building, and inter-connectedness and yields youth-based positive results?” I.e., how can we reframe how we define success through a youth-based framework? We then partnered with the Center for Housing and Homelessness Research at the University of Denver to interview over 70 youth and staff at Urban Peak (those currently utilizing their day center and shelter, as well as youth on the street who were resistant to engaging in services). These interviews highlighted the problems that needed to be solved, so we could prioritize our design response according to the stated needs of youth and staff – not based off our own assumptions. The iterative design process became more about the service platform than about the architecture. The design was responsive to end-user feedback, front-line staff concerns and contractor, engineering, and executive feedback.

To promote joy, we didn't just design a shelter, we designed a dignified home for youth experiencing homelessness. Every decision was made through a “what is best for the kids” frame - not what was expedient or easy. The entire building design promotes youth dignity and sense of worth, starting at the front door and permeating throughout the building. The initial results communicate a successful outcome– since moving into the new building critical incident reports (calls to police/fire) are down 70% and youth engagement in supportive services, including case management, is up 90%.



SUPPORTING IMAGES

ORIGINAL SHELTER RENOVATION PLAN - 2016 The first design concept, produced in 2016 was to simply renovate the existing shelter to create a livable environment - plans and renderings are seen on the facing page.

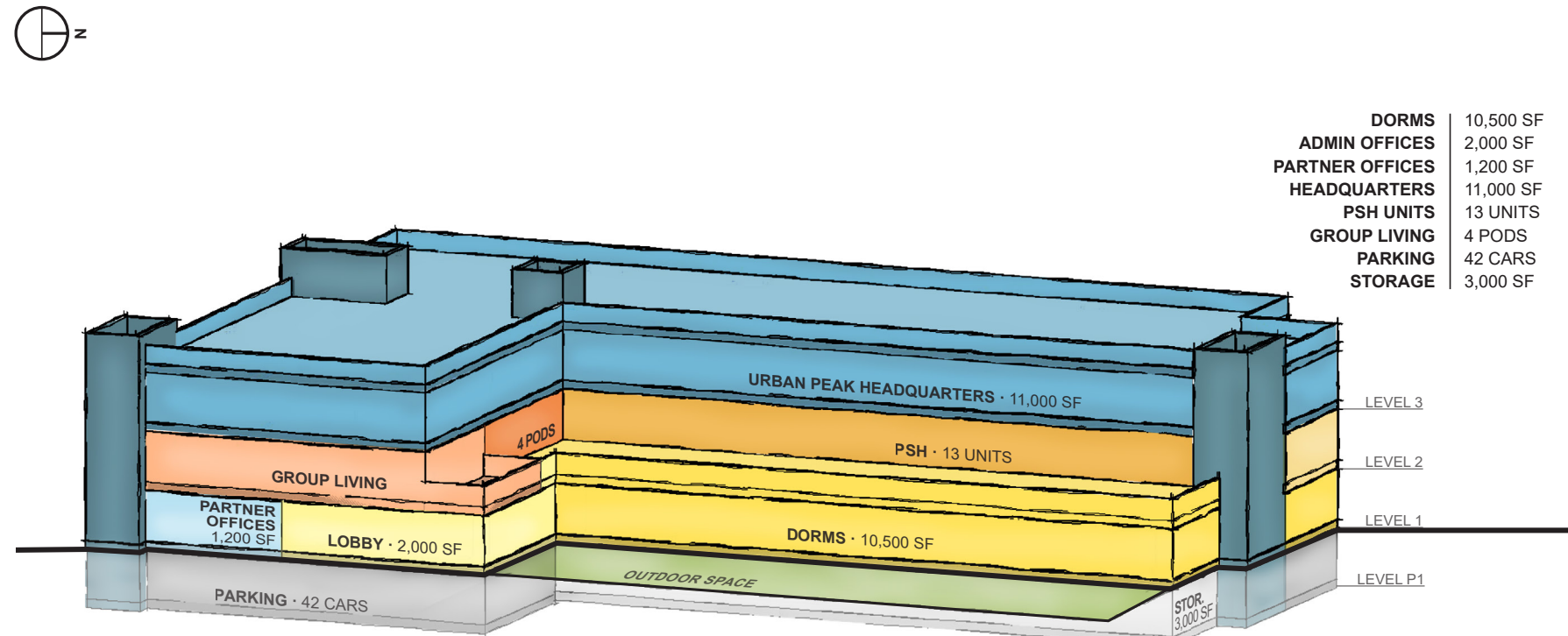


SUPPORTING IMAGES

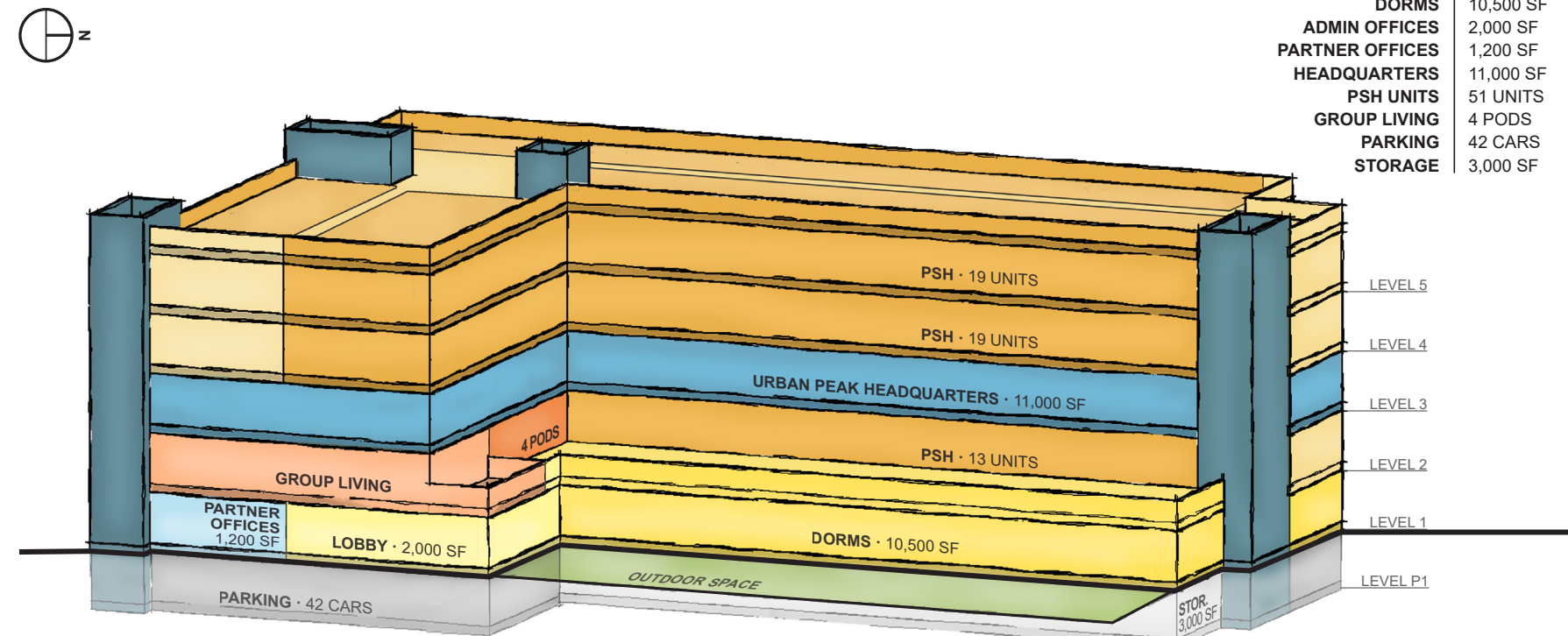
ATTEMPT TO INTEGRATE LIHTC - 2017 The team realized that the initial renovation would not meet the needs of Urban Peak - and that more private residences were critical for the youth moving forward on their paths towards stability. In 2017 the team brought in a developer who explored with them the concept of integrating affordable housing units into the development via the Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program. You can see here the "PSH" or Permanent Supportive Housing Units that would be accessible to youth who were chronically homeless with a disability. The team explored a 3-story and 4-story building.



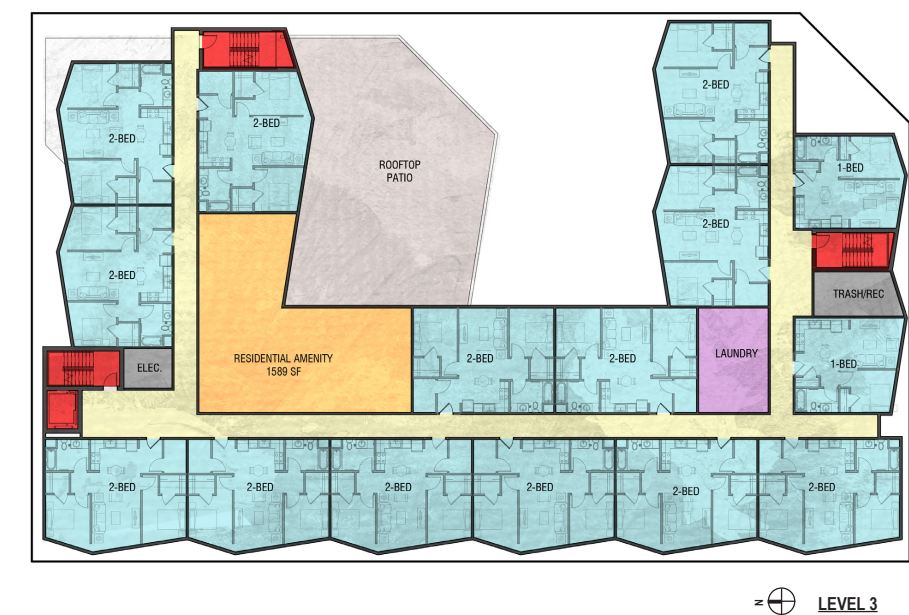
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LEVEL 1 PLAN SCALE = 1:60
LEVEL 2 PLAN SCALE = 1:60



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LEVEL 1 PLAN SCALE = 1:60
LEVEL 2 PLAN SCALE = 1:60



LIHTC + ROOMMATE PHILOSOPHY - 2018 However, Urban Peak quickly realized that traditional supportive housing models may not be the best housing intervention for youth who are undergoing massive developmental shifts and often with few social supports (the LIHTC program requires a traditional year-long lease that might not work for youth still in transition). The development team then took the risky step of envisioning the ideal environment to support the type of flexible and responsive service approach that would most benefit their youth. The first iteration of that concept is below.

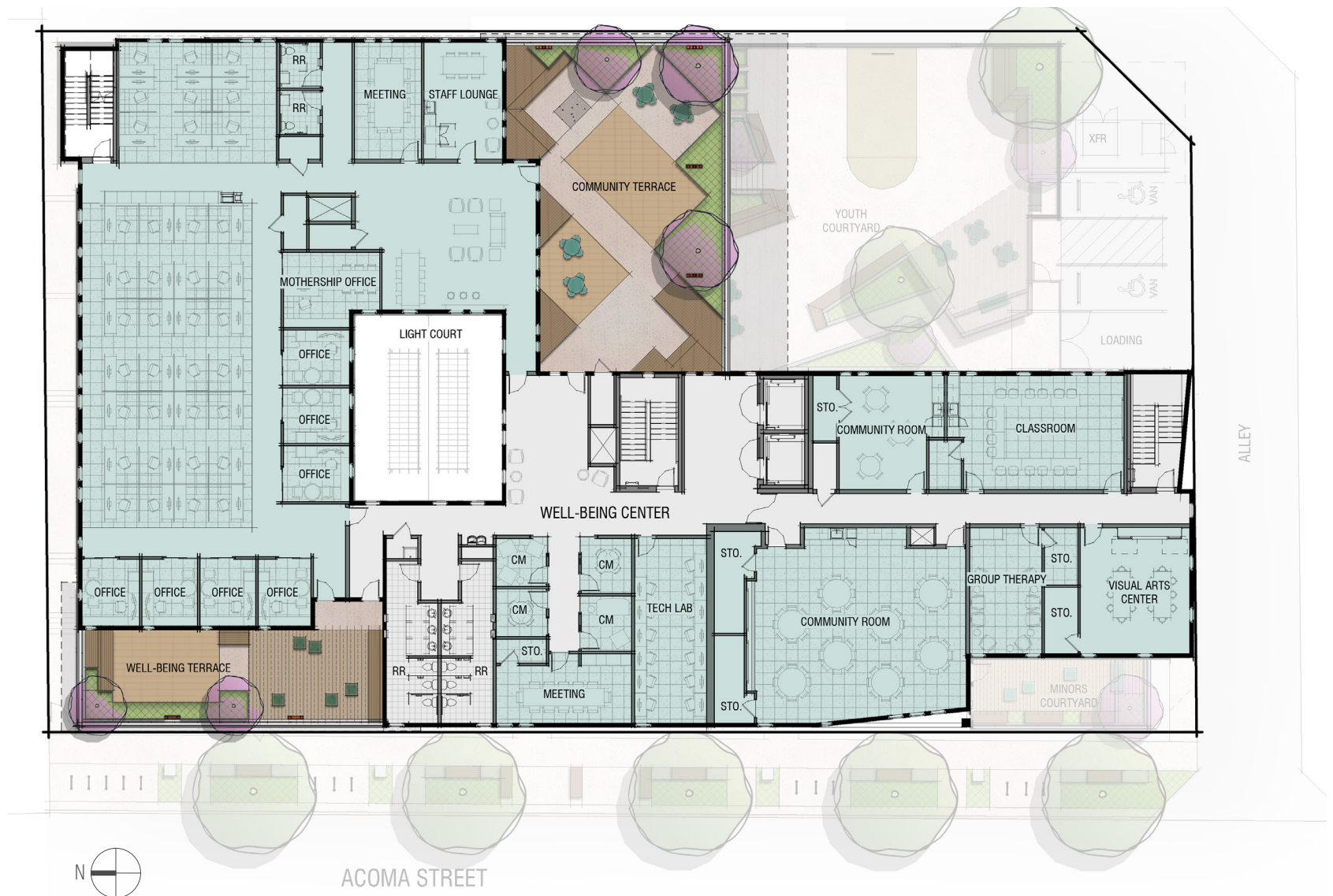
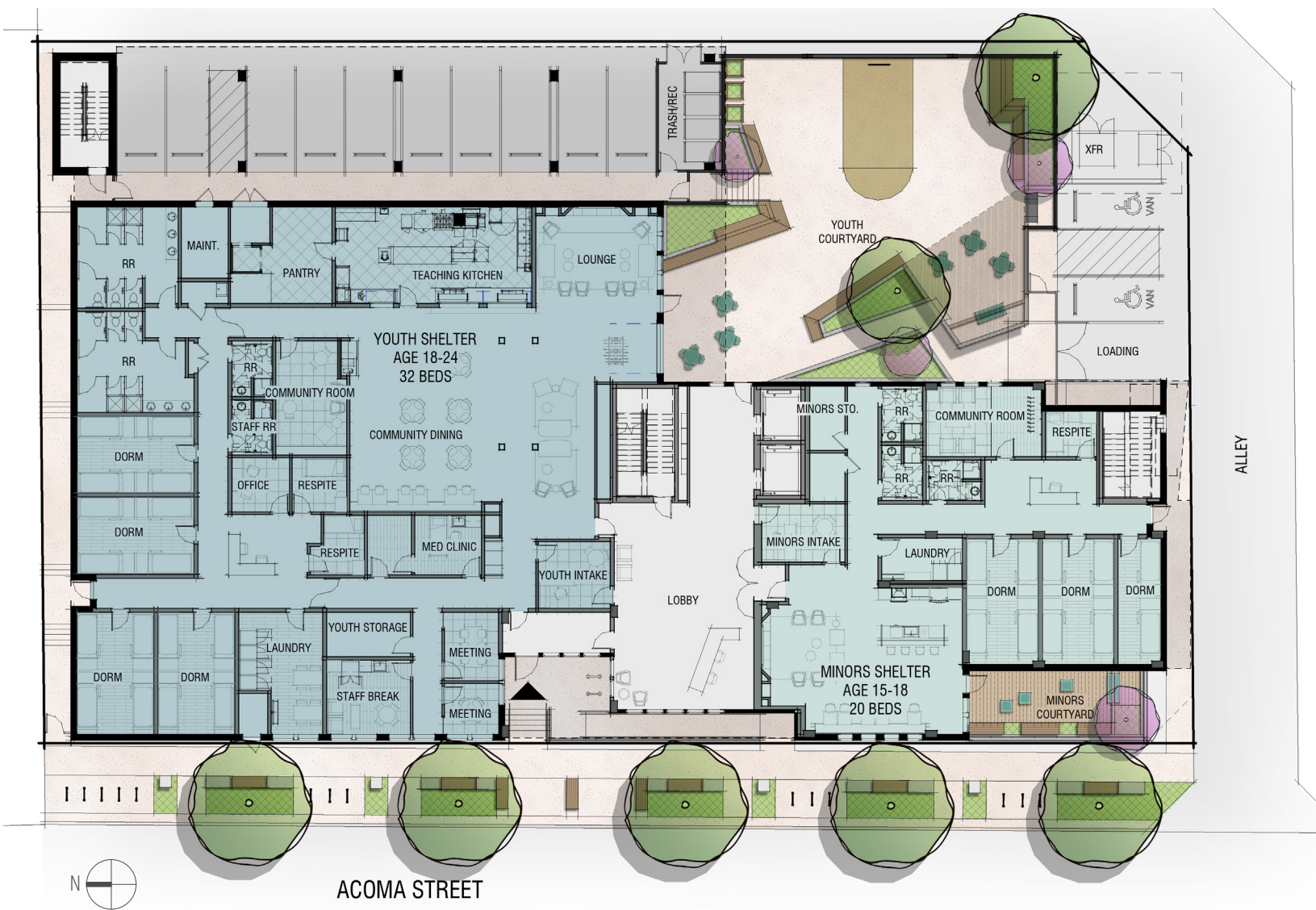
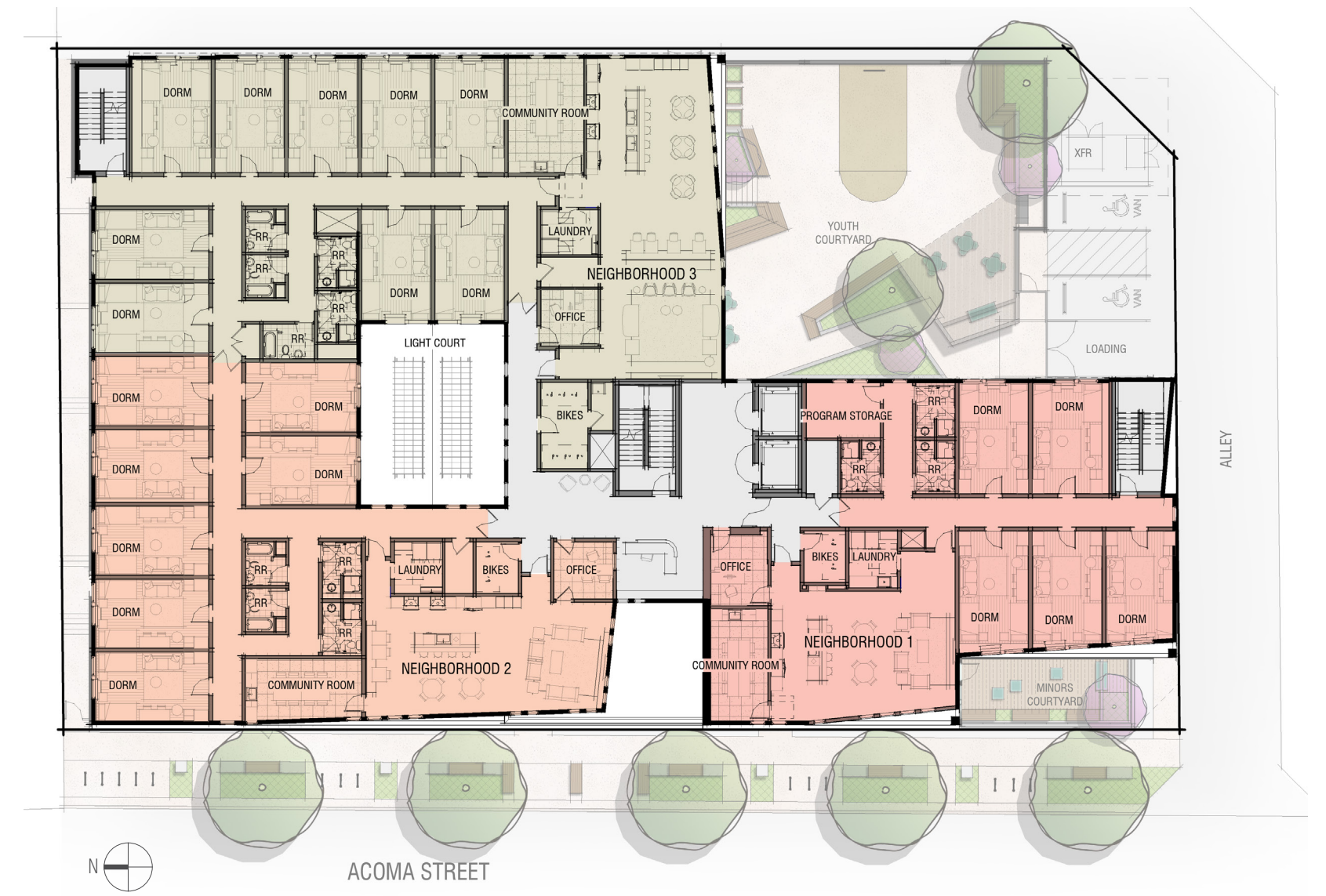


LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

SUPPORTING IMAGES

DYNAMIC FINAL CONCEPT - NEIGHBORHOODS - 2020 The team continued to iterate on the design through 2020. In doing so, Urban Peak accepted that this uncharted building and programming typology would not fit traditional funding mechanisms and would require that they fundraise every dollar. Prioritizing the health and well-being of their youth over ease and expedience, the team decided to do what was right and bring the dynamic idea to life. The idea of the Mothership rests on the ideas of neighborhoods - breaking a large shelter into smaller communities - acknowledging that youth need community and support to take the next step in their lives. Thus, by offering six smaller neighborhoods with a grouping of dorms that sleep 2-4 people, as well as shared laundry, bike room, living room and kitchen, as well as a dedicated staff person, youth can create community but not experience the crowds prevalent in so many shelters. While the concept of the Neighborhood created consensus, it still took a few iterations before the plans you see here, that demonstrate what was eventually built. At the property today, youth neighborhoods can be arranged around shared identities or experiences - for example young parents, or individuals who choose to be sober. By offering staff support, a shared living space, and small dorms, youth have both the privacy and community to move through the next phase of their lives. Additionally, at this step the team leaned into their trauma-informed design research and engaged with youth and staff to listen to their needs and wants, so they could be fully implemented into the design of the development. More about our trauma-informed design expertise is found in the "Framework for Design Excellence" page.



SUPPORTING IMAGES

GRAND OPENING - 2024

As Christina Carlson, CEO of Urban Peak, shared at the grand opening, "We needed a space where people could feel safe and find love and find security. It had to be about our staff, it had to be about addressing trauma, and most importantly it had to be about youth."

But, more importantly – this is about the voices of the youth informing the design. As Azul, an Urban Peak Youth noted when walking through the building, "It feels like a breath of fresh air to be at The Mothership."

As Mayor Mike Johnson shared at the grand opening, "The Mothership is what love looks like in a physical form."









URBAN PEAK

vision
All Colorado youth have
safe housing,
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and the opportunity for
self-sufficiency
and success.

urban peak
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