



Up

LOOKING

By Sarah Humphreys

A new health-resource center in San Francisco is giving some local residents another reason to feel proud. Magnet, located in the heart of the storied Castro neighborhood, is a first-of-its-kind facility devoted to the well being of gay men who live in the area and its innovative new ceiling system helps set the tone.

◀ *An innovative new translucent ceiling product called the TOPO™ 3-Dimensional System from USG Interiors, Inc. provides a dramatic look throughout the center and ties the entire space together. The center is divided into three zones, one behind the other: a front reception-type area, a community-and-information-resource area in the middle, and private rooms for counseling and lab work at the back.*

The health of its residents has put the Castro on center stage for decades, but Director Steven Gibson says Magnet is not simply another AIDS clinic. "Magnet's goal is to connect gay men with health and wellness information, resources and each other," says Gibson. He explains that the storefront, which opened in July 2003, offers integrated health services and information, including HIV testing as well as services for substance abuse and mental health. In addition to providing health services, Magnet holds ongoing community events, including book readings, art exhibits and town hall forums "that bring men together in an affirming environment that embraces gay-male culture in all of its diversity."

The overall design had to reflect the welcoming philosophy behind the facility, as well as the design-savvy set who were likely to partake of its services, says David Meckley, IIDA, former director of interiors for Miller/Kelley Architects, the San Francisco firm awarded the project. Working with members of Magnet's Community Advisory Board, he set out to design a space more attuned to a hotel lobby than a medical clinic. To break the stigma of walking into a health clinic, he attempted to answer the challenge, "How do we create this center that doesn't say, 'Oh, no, something's wrong with Bill?'. 'If you're trying to reach out to the community as we are, you have to make everyone realize this is a very different type of center,'" says Gibson.

To set the right tone and effectively use the long, narrow 1,600-square-foot space, Miller/Kelley first divided it into three zones, one behind the other: a front reception area, an information-resource area in

the middle, and private rooms for counseling and lab work at the back. To encourage visitors to "meander back through to all areas," Meckley says, Miller/Kelley created a visual pathway on the ceiling through partnering strategically placed colored lighting and an innovative new translucent ceiling product, the TOPO™ 3-Dimensional System, manufactured by Chicago-based USG Interiors, Inc.

"The product transforms flat ceiling planes into uniquely expressive undulating landscapes full of form, dimension and color," says Meckley. The system consists of preformed 2-foot-by-2-foot translucent and opaque LEXAN® infill panels installed into the precurved, 9/16-inch-wide DONN® Brand TOPO Suspension System. The infill panels are designed in four-panel modules to create the impact of gently rolling curves.

The ceiling system is available in depths of 8 inches or 12 inches, and a color choice of blue, green, clear or white, as well as five degrees of translucency. Miller/Kelley specified the translucent white panels, giving the ceiling a chic, silvery look. Track lights along the sides help illuminate artwork on the fabric-covered walls, while blue-gel-covered lights shine through the TOPO ceiling, creating a path from the reception area to the back counseling and lab rooms. At Magnet, the 8-inch TOPO system selected had to navigate around an existing beam and conceal the colored light fixture.

"The lighting design, donated by h.e. banks + associates, and the TOPO system bring it together in terms of energy," says Gibson. "They make Magnet feel like anything but the typical cold and impersonal clinic."

But Miller/Kelley had to keep in mind that while some are walking into the storefront just to "hang out," others actually are seeking a clinic—with health information and services of a highly personal nature. For that reason, the TOPO ceiling transitions from an 11-foot elevation in the front to a 9-foot elevation near the back where the counseling takes place.

"As a result, the TOPO system creates a more intimate environment as you move back into the space,"



▲ *A full metal wall in the reception area features large magnetic letters designed to encourage visitors to step into the center and express themselves, just like they would on a friend's refrigerator door.*

says Gibson. But did that—and several columns punctuating the space—make the ceiling more difficult to install? Not at all, says Michael VanBemmel, vice president of Ireland Interior Systems, the San Francisco subcontractor that provided the installation. He says that although his crew of two had never installed a TOPO ceiling before, the learning curve was remarkably fast and installation was easy. "The challenge was just that it was a new system," he says. "We've been around for 30 years. It's not something we're afraid of."

Although VanBemmel was sure of his crew's skill in handling the installation, he was pleasantly surprised by the final product. "It's the nicest-looking ceiling I've ever seen," says VanBemmel, who not only plans to put it in his office, but also has been sending clients over to Magnet to let the system's dramatic appearance speak for itself. "The ceiling is the 'wow' effect," agrees Gibson.

The high-profile attendees at its ribbon-cutting ceremony—including San Francisco's mayor, city supervisors and the director of public health, as well as representatives from Magnet's main sponsors (Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. and UCSF Center for AIDS Prevention Studies)—were overwhelmed by the center's sensational interior, which also includes a full metal magnetic wall, wood floor, whimsical furnishings, bright blue and green walls, and columns painted Golden Gate Red. "It's not a tremendously large space," says Meckley, "but it sure makes a big impact." ■

—Sarah Humphreys is a free-lance writer based in the Los Angeles area.

◀ *The new Magnet health-resource center in San Francisco offers a variety of services devoted to the well being of gay men who live and congregate in the area.*

