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Original Athens Asylum building shows design influences

By STEVE ROBB Messenger staff journalist Jun 27, 2018



This aerial view of the Athens Asylum shows the influence of a 19th Century doctor, Thomas Kirkbride. Its central administrative building has two attached wings designed to maximize sunlight and ventilation for mental patients.

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Unless you're steeped in the history of the Athens Asylum, you probably don't know that the design of the main building owes much to an 1854 book written by a Pennsylvania doctor.

The Ohio University-owned building, located at what is now known as The Ridges, is of a design promoted by Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, who believed that the physical surroundings of mental patients could help cure them.



On Saturday, a relative of Kirkbride, Associate Professor of Architecture and Design Robert Kirkbride of the Parsons School of Design in New York, spoke at The Ridges Auditorium about the original theories behind what have become known as the Kirkbride asylums. He also spoke about how over time attitudes about asylums changed, and how that has made them easy targets for demolition.

About 75 Kirkbride asylums were built in the United States, Canada and Australia in the second half of the 19th century and 34 remain.

“Despite the noble intent of the builders and the generosity of their designs, Kirkbride hospitals, and asylums in general, now haunt the popular imagination due to an abysmal cocktail of overcrowding, institutional neglect and questionable medical procedures,” he told Saturday’s audience.

The main building at the Athens Asylum (and at other Kirkbride asylums) was designed with a central administrative building, with the patient rooms in staggered wings connected to each side of the central building. The Athens building was designed by architect Levi Scofield, who was obviously influenced by Thomas Kirkbride.

Kirkbride told Saturday’s audience that Thomas Kirkbride believed in the therapeutic value of architecture, beauty and respectful care. The 1854 treatise, dubbed the Kirkbride Plan, called for buildings designed to provide patients with plentiful sunlight, prevailing breezes and views of bucolic landscaped grounds. The Kirkbride Plan hospitals often had self-sustaining farms for food and occupational therapy.

The Athens Asylum had such a farm. Its once-beautiful grounds were destroyed by the rerouting of the Hocking River for a flood-control project.

Kirkbride told the audience that Thomas Kirkbride referred to the asylums as hospitals because he believed their purpose was to cure mentally ill patients.

The ideal patient population, under the Kirkbride Plan, was 250 patients.

Kirkbride told the audience that almost from the beginning patient populations averaged in the thousands, largely due to the impacts (such post traumatic stress disorder) of the Civil War.

“Even Athens began with about 570 patients,” Kirkbride said.

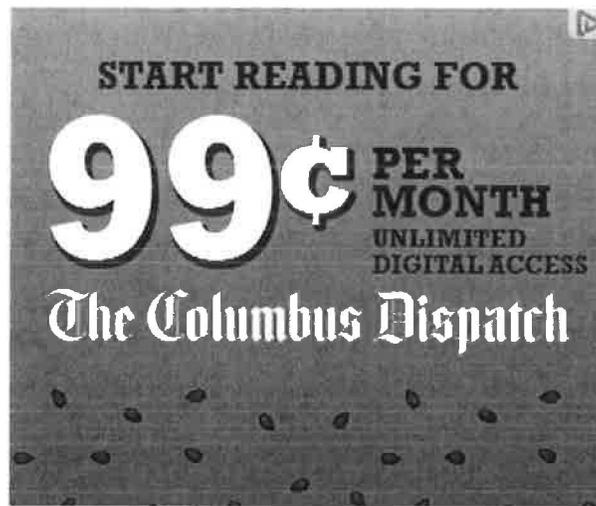
Besides overcrowding and inadequate resources, the asylums became catchalls for people with misunderstood conditions such as epilepsy and multiple sclerosis and for people with communicable diseases (such as TB), Kirkbride told Saturday’s audience.

Dissident Native Americans were shipped to a federally run Kirkbride asylum in Washington, D.C., and there were other instances of misusing the hospitals. Kirkbride told the story of a man committed to an asylum because he spoke in tongues, when in reality he was speaking Turkish.

Over time, public attitudes toward asylums changed, taking on a negative connotation, and Kirkbride’s theories on treatment fell out of favor.

“Over the past half century, Kirkbride hospitals have become ... easy targets for public scorn and demolition,” Kirkbride said, citing examples of some that have been torn down — including one demolished to make way for a Walmart.

“There are complex and conflicting views toward the preservation or destruction of Kirkbride hospitals and an urgency to decouple the buildings from their associated stigmas,” Kirkbride said.



He said coming up with new uses for the buildings can result in some unusual couplings — for example, the Washington, D.C., Kirkbride hospital is being renovated for use by Homeland Security.

“Kirkbrides hold a strong fascination for fans of the paranormal, and I know this is a source of division in various communities,” Kirkbride said. Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum in Weston, West Virginia, draws more than 60,000 visitors a year with its historical and paranormal tours, a financial incentive that Kirkbride said is difficult to dismiss.

Kirkbride, who is a spokesman for Preservation Works, a group that advocates for the preservation and adaptive reuse of Kirkbride buildings, said the Athens Asylum main building (which opened 1874) is one of 34 remaining Kirkbride hospitals. He praised Ohio University and the Athens community for working to save the building.

Since 1996, the administrative section of the Athens Asylums main building has housed the Kennedy Museum. This past January, the OU Trustees approved funding to renovate the east wing of the building into university offices.

Kirkbride spoke as part of Southeast Ohio History Center’s Athens Asylum Sesquicentennial Series. Construction of the asylum began in 1868.