



# CHASE BREXTON HEALTH CARE: Preserving the Past, Paving the Way for Affordable, Top-Quality Health Care



How the adaptive reuse of a Baltimore landmark enables Chase Brexton Health Care to fulfill a vital community need

## THE CHALLENGES

Chase Brexton Health Care started in 1978 as a one-room, volunteer-run HIV/AIDS clinic — and grew over the years to a full-service health system with multiple centers across Maryland and a rapidly expanding patient population. By 2011, the number of patients neared 20,000, and the rollout of the federal government’s Affordable Care Act pointed to even more potential expansion. To compete in the evolving marketplace, Chase Brexton’s existing headquarters and main clinic, scattered among three separate buildings, no longer sufficed. The nonprofit health care organization needed a modern facility to push forward its mission to provide high-quality, affordable health care to community members in need. It also needed to consolidate its clinical and administrative spaces under one roof.

To house the new headquarters, the company purchased the Monumental Life Building at 1111 North Charles Street, a protected historic landmark and Baltimore icon in the downtown neighborhood of Mt. Vernon.





The building, which originally served as an insurance company headquarters, spans an entire city block and consists of four adjoining buildings constructed between 1925 and 1968. Together, the buildings gave Chase Brexton approximately 192,000 square feet with which to work, but a number of features made the space unsuitable as a state-of-the-art health center.

A massive stairwell and elevators dominated the vertical core of the building and created a closed layout. Offices and rooms stood in isolation from one another, and the overall space felt choppy and lacked a sense of flow. Secret passageways, safe rooms, and other signs of the building's start as an insurance company filled the bottom level, while design elements of the 1920s — bronze doors, gold-leaf ceilings, and marble floors and walls — adorned the lobby.

"The historical features were stunning, but the building, as it stood, didn't serve Chase Brexton's needs," explained Faith Nevins, lead architect on the project and a principal at Marks, Thomas Architects.

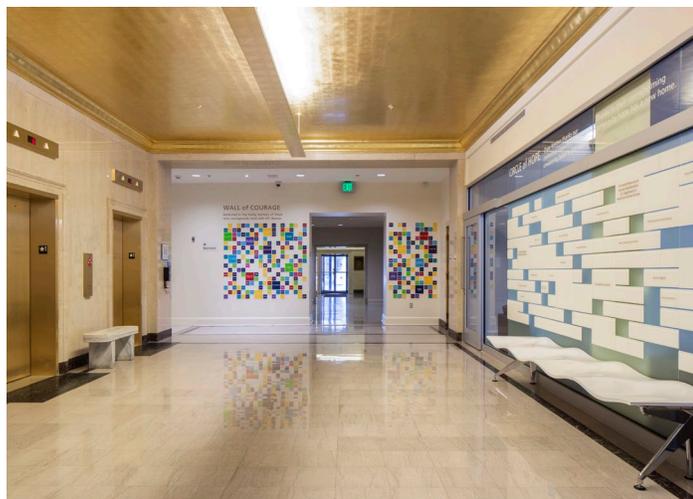
**"Open, flexible spaces are key design features of modern health facilities because they allow health care providers to collaborate and make it easier and more convenient for patients to get the care they need."**



The building's layout needed a total overhaul, but all alterations needed approval from Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation before they could be made. Chase Brexton turned to two architecture firms, Marks, Thomas Architects and NBBJ, a Seattle-based architecture company that focuses on health care, for help. Together, Marks, Thomas Architects and NBBJ partnered with Chase Brexton to create a space that puts patients at the center and enables health care providers to work together and deliver top-of-the-line care.

## THE WORK

Chase Brexton wanted the new clinic to reflect the "lean methodology," an approach to operations used in multiple industries that strives to add value to the customer (or patient) experience. In health care, the lean method seeks to eliminate all forms of "waste" for patients, physicians, and the organization at large. "Waste," in this sense, means everything from long patient wait times and cumbersome paperwork to difficulty finding the right exam room or physician's office, and filling a prescription. For the organization at large, waste can mean unnecessary processing steps, fragmented workflows, misused materials and supplies, and superfluous expenses.



### Opening the floor plan

To achieve Chase Brexton's vision and make the building truly patient-centered, a first priority was to get rid of the stairwell and elevator shafts occupying the middle of the building. "Until the vertical core was removed, we couldn't open up the floor plan," Nevins said. "So we tore out the stairwell and all but one elevator bank, and then infilled the concrete floors. Once that was done, the window walls could be seen from the center of the building, and the contiguous floor plate was available for a totally new layout."

"We were surprised to learn that the core could be removed," Alicia Gabriel, the marketing manager at Chase Brexton, shared. "We just figured it had to be utilized and were scratching our heads over how to organize the patient flow around it."



### Putting patients at the center

With the vertical core gone, the opportunity arose to create the kind of flexible, patient-centered space Chase Brexton envisioned. The team decided on a unique pod-like design, in which doctors and health care providers work in a central space from which individual patient exam rooms radiate. “The idea here is that patients would enter from one door, and the other door would be accessed by a pod of doctors, nurses, phlebotomists, case managers, and so on,” explained Nevins.

“Instead of patients having to navigate and go to different offices and clinics, **the patient stays in the same exam room while the services come to them.**”



On top of making life easier for patients and fostering collaboration among care providers, this strategy helped increase patient compliance with doctors’ orders. “Non-compliance is a huge issue with low-income populations, in which patients often don’t get the lab work they need or the medicine their doctor prescribes, whether because of insurance complications, cost barriers, or just a lack of convenience,” Gabriel said. “This new design eases the burden on patients and makes it far easier for them to comply.”



### Preserving history, creating anew

While Marks, Thomas Architects and NBBJ set out to create a modern, patient-centered facility, they also preserved and brought back to life the many iconic design elements of the second decade of the 20th century. Using original methods, the team refinished the lobby’s imitation gold-leaf ceiling; restored the marble walls and floors; and repaired the limestone facade. They also restored the original wood-paneled board room from 1928 and repaired the signature “MONUMENTAL LIFE” emblem with gold lettering on the building’s exterior.

“As we inter-mixed historical and modern features, we wanted to make sure there was a contrast between the old and the new,” Nevins said. “That’s how preservation is supposed to work – valuable characteristics built in the 21st century need to be of their time, just as the features we restore from the 1920s need to reflect the style and intentions of that time period.”





## THE RESULTS

Chase Brexton Health Care's new headquarters opened its doors in 2013 as a state-of-the-art health clinic in the heart of the community in which it originated, Mount Vernon. The renovation enabled Chase Brexton to achieve and even surpass a number of goals, including:

- The consolidation of administrative offices and the main clinic
- An innovative “pod” design that puts patients at the center of their own care
- A work environment that fosters collaboration among health care providers and enables them to better coordinate care
- Space for new and expanded obstetrics/gynecological services — and for comprehensive care that includes dental, pharmacy, mental health, and substance abuse services

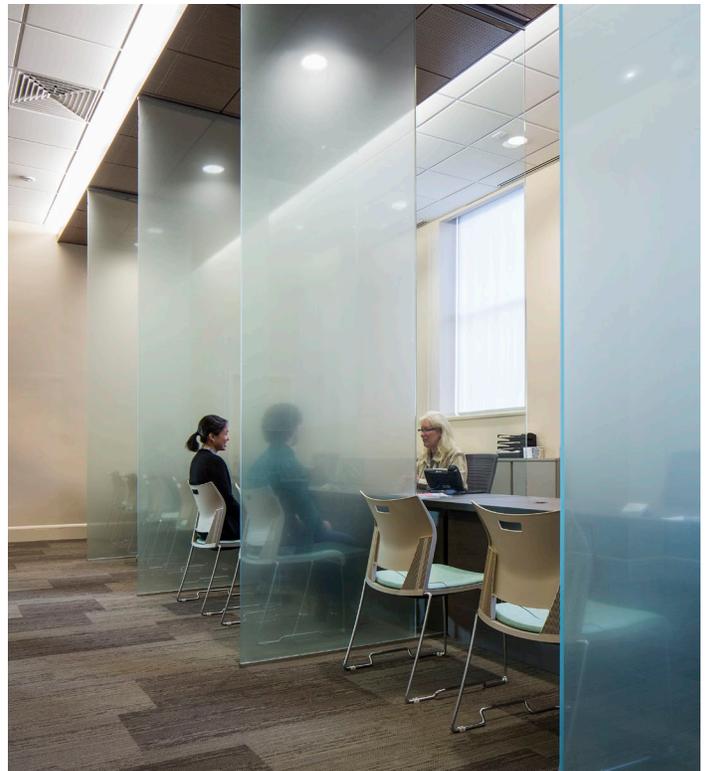
**“Our approach is truly patient-centered, and the new building reflects that approach in every way,”** Gabriel said.



Our physicians, nurses, and other staff members have only positive things to say about the flow of their new work environment and sense of teamwork it creates. Ultimately, they get to focus on patient health and deliver better care.”

As a result of these achievements, Chase Brexton received the prestigious designation as a Level II Patient-Centered Medical Home, given to health care organizations by the National Committee for Quality Assurance for achieving better care at lower costs. The new facility also earned a 2014 Award for Adaptive Reuse from Baltimore Heritage, along with Honorable Mention in Health Care Design from the 2014 American Institute of Architects, Baltimore (AIA Baltimore) Design in Excellence Awards.

Perhaps most importantly, the new Chase Brexton Health Care center and headquarters positions the nonprofit organization to accommodate the influx of patients newly covered by Medicaid and other insurance options under the federal Affordable Care Act. The facility can now provide optimal care for an estimated 25,000 more patients — doubling its potential patient population and filling an enormous need for affordable and comprehensive top-quality care in and around Baltimore.





## ABOUT CHASE BREXTON HEALTH CARE

Chase Brexton Health Care is a primary care provider serving a diverse group of patients across six Maryland-based clinics in Baltimore City, Randallstown, Columbia, Easton, and at Sheppard Pratt's Way Station office and as a provider of the student health services at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). As a Joint Commission-accredited Federally Quality Health Center (FQHC), Chase Brexton provides a range of clinical services, from primary medical care to behavioral health services and pharmacy. The organization's 300 staff members work as a team to put patients at the center of their own care and empower them to live their healthiest lives. For more information, visit [ChaseBrexton.org](https://ChaseBrexton.org).

## ABOUT MARKS, THOMAS ARCHITECTS

Founded in 1967, Marks, Thomas Architects is an established, award-winning architecture firm focused on creating environments that enhance our clients' business, the user experience, and the entire community. The firm is a leader in the creation of senior communities, student housing, adaptive reuse, waterfront housing, urban mixed-use communities, and institutional projects. Services include architectural design, planning, urban design, programming, sustainable design, and interior design. For more information, visit [marks-thomas.com](https://marks-thomas.com).