A Seaside Resort for Sick Babies

“It is a matter of fact that salt sea air will often do more good to a sick puny child than any of the medical remedies of pharmacopoeia…”
- James Sprunt, Wilmington, NC

Babies Hospital 1928

Babies Hospital had a total of three screened convalescent porches. Here infants could receive treatments of fresh air and sunlight constantly. This was unlike the convalescent porches found in city hospitals where the children often had to be brought inside due to periods of dense smog.

Screened Convalescent Porch

Roof Garden and Sun Baths

Like convalescent porches, rooftop decks first appeared in sanatoriums as places where patients could absorb direct sunlight. At Babies Hospital, sunlight was often used to treat children with ricketts.

The Main Ward

One of the most important aspects of the main ward was that it was surrounded entirely by windows. This allowed for “antiseptic” sunlight to reach each and every patient. Additionally, the windows were designed so that they could be opened. This meant fresh air could constantly blow through.

A Change in Design

Babies Hospital was originally placed in Wilmington, NC because of its proximity to the salt sea air. However, by the late 1950s, renovations altered the hospital to the extent that it could be placed anywhere. Notice in the image above that a third floor has been added, the convalescent porches have been completely enclosed, and the windows are no longer open and appear to be sealed.

When healing came from opening windows, not from taking a pill.

Founded by Dr. Sidbury in 1920, Babies Hospital prided itself on its proximity to the fresh sea air. As the first hospital in North Carolina dedicated solely to the treatment of infants and children, Babies Hospital quickly became the go-to hospital of the region. Babies Hospital provides the perfect opportunity to examine how changing ideas of germ theory connected to older ideas about air and light. It was built during the period when germ theory was becoming widely accepted, yet treatment methods remained mostly traditional. This case study also reveals the increasing expectations of keeping up with advances in medicine and its impact on the design and function of a hospital.

Why did a pioneering example of medical architecture fade so completely?

The boom of medical discoveries in the mid-1900s, such as antibiotics, radically shifted treatment methods. Shifts towards more “artificial” means of treatment led to changes in the design of medical facilities. Babies Hospital closed its doors to patients in 1978 because its design made it difficult to keep up with new medical advances. It was later torn down in 2004 after an unsuccessful attempt to preserve it. Gone with the building was a moment in medical history when practitioners blended the modern idea of germ theory with older ideas about the curative powers of fresh air and sunlight.

Archival Sources:
James Buren Sidbury Papers, 1915-1967, Duke University Library, Durham, NC
Babies Hospital, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington,

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