



redesigning lives **OT**

by Diane Krieger

Something Old, Something New

A 19th-century preservation project may hold the keys to 21st-century questions about how a high-tech lifestyle impacts health and happiness.

IN AN EXQUISITELY preserved Victorian mansion a few blocks north of the University Park campus, USC is forging historic links – both therapeutic and poetic – with the past. Two years ago the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy established this renovated Queen Anne-style beauty (the 1894 Cockins House) as the USC Center for Occupation and Lifestyle Redesign, the world's first center dedicated to the study of how everyday activities shape human health and well-being in modern life. From its graceful spires and carved scrollwork to its period furniture and wallpaper, the new center breathes the authentic Arts and Crafts period, and there's profound symbolism in that, according to OT chair Florence Clark, who regards her department as the spiritual heir to the Chicago School of Sociology, the intellectual nerve center of the turn-of-the-century Settlement Movement.

TO UNDERSTAND

THIS you must understand that the philosophical roots of occupational therapy trace back to pragmatic philosophers John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, as well as social work pioneer Jane Addams, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for



her work at Hull House, a sort of proto-community center for Chicago immigrants living in abject poverty. Premised, in Dewey's words, on an "endeavor to nurture human life even in its most humble and least promising forms," settlement houses rose up through the early 1900s in major American cities specifically to help a wave of immigrants gain basic domestic and workplace skills to allow them to be successful in their adopted country.

Another such effort was George Barton's Consolation House in New York. An architect and an amputee, Barton established his settlement house to offer various kinds of therapy for a better quality of life. Deeply aware of the effects of aesthetics, Barton paid careful attention to the wallpaper, the furnishings, the ambiance of each room in Consolation House, all informed by the Arts and Crafts movement.

Clark sees the USC lifestyle redesign center as a 21st-century reinterpretation of Settlement Movement ideas, down to the Arts and Crafts connections (USC has prior ties to the movement through its stewardship of the historic Gamble House). "We want to reclaim a lot of that tradition," she says, "especially since USC has been recognized for its involvement in community development, growth and outreach. We wanted to be part of that in a forward-thinking yet traditional way."

LIKE THE SETTLEMENT houses and early occupational therapy settings, the Center for Lifestyle Redesign is a magnet for community programs. In the near future, Clark envisions a large community-based practice operating here, as well as crafts

workshops geared for the center's mostly poor, mostly Latino neighbors. Last winter's Victorian holiday party set the stage, bringing together USC's entire OT community with neighbors from Sunshine Mission/ Casa de Rosas, a homeless shelter with strong ties to the department's undergraduate residence, OT House.

But community outreach is only half the picture. The lifestyle redesign center also facilitates cutting-edge research. Here, the department's 29-member faculty and dozens of graduate students have the chance to analyze occupation with scientific precision. On the third floor of this fully handicapped-accessible building are two adjacent research spaces – one dotted with computer workstations, the other lined with long tables perfect for craft projects.

Both will be equipped with technology to monitor vital signs, opening the door to a host of comparative studies on the physiological and psychological states of people engaged in different occupations. The ultimate goal, of course, is to detect how engagement in different activities affects physiology and thereby get clues to what constitutes an optimal balance of work, rest and leisure.

At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, Clark openly worries: "We don't know the full impact of the screen, or the impact of being cooped up all day, or of children watching 20 to 30 hours of TV a week," she says.

"We're raising a generation of people over-focused on passive activity. I even worry about surgeons. Who are tomorrow's surgeon's going to be? If children aren't doing a lot of fine-motor activities – using crayons, making things with their hands – they may not develop the same kind of dexterity as past generations."