



Designer Tom Galvin learns lessons from blind clients at the Cleveland Sight Center

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By **Steven Litt**, *The Plain Dealer*



Tom Galvin at the Cleveland Sight Center: *"I'm in the true make-a-difference part of my life and it's amazing."*

(Photograph by Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer)

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- **Tom Galvin's** first impulse in designing a \$9.8 million renovation of the **Cleveland Sight Center** was a tender one.

He wanted to make life as easy as possible for clients of the 105-year-old Cleveland institution, which provides rehabilitation, education, recreation and job training services for blind and visually impaired residents from across Northeast Ohio.

But when he really listened to the Center's clients, he had a revelation: sympathy was exactly what they didn't want.

"You need to have challenges for the clients as they learn, not just mollycoddle them and hold their hands," said **Vic Leanza**, a 78-year-old semi-retired psychologist and board member at the center, who has been blind since his 30s.

Accordingly, Galvin, a studio director at the Cleveland architecture and interior design firm of **Vocon**, created a clean, simple interior design that uses contrasting materials, acoustics and

simple planning to give users a sense of orientation through touch, sound and spatial organization.

"This building is a teaching tool, but it's about real life," Galvin said. "The goal is to help people get around in the real world."

Galvin's journey from gentleness to realism was a key pivot in the transformation of a venerable Cleveland institution, which had grown dowdy, tired-looking and disorganized after a pair of mediocre additions and a string of ad hoc alterations in recent decades.

When finished next year after a gutting and interior reconstruction, the Sight Center will have a sharper, fresher look, with a layout that exploits the contrast between smooth terrazzo floors and nubbly-textured carpeting to give users cues about where they are.

Key services such as the Center's **Low Vision Clinic** and its **Eyedeas Shop**, which sells products useful to the blind, will be clustered near the main entrance, where they'll be easy to reach. Hallways will be straightened, and doorways will be recessed at various depths to give subtle indications of location.

A wide open café in the southwest corner of the building, on the second floor, will occupy prime real estate near a stairwell - and replace the executive director's office, which formerly occupied the area. "We're transforming how people work at the Sight Center and how clients learn," Galvin said. Originally established in 1906, the Center moved in the mid-1960s into its third and current home at 1909 East 101st St. in Cleveland on the border



A \$9.8 million renovation will repair the exterior of the Cleveland Sight Center, but the real transformation will be inside.

(Photograph by Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer)

between University Circle to the east and the Cleveland Clinic area to the west.

Every year, the Center serves 10,000 clients by providing everything from diagnostic services to employment training to lessons in independent living.

Clients learn everything from how to navigate public transit in Cleveland to how to cook a hamburger. Through a partnership with **InfoCision**, the Akron based telemarketing company, the Center trains clients to work in call centers, including an InfoCision satellite operation based at the Sight Center itself.

The Center also operates **Highbrook Lodge** in Chardon, one of three camps in the U.S. designed for blind and visually impaired adults and children.

The Center's main building at East 101st Street was designed in 1964 by the Cleveland firm of Outcault, Gunther, Rode & Bonebrake.

Around that time, the same firm gave Cleveland State University the defensive air of a prison with massive brick and concrete buildings in the aptly named Brutalist style.

The Sight Center is a two-story variation on the same theme, with narrow and heavily framed vertical window bays set among large expanses of concrete pebble aggregate panels that vaguely resemble peanut brittle.

Simple brick expansions in the 1970s and 80s tripled the size of the facility to 75,000 square feet, and gave it a central garden court, but left it with meandering hallways and client services scattered throughout the structure in ways especially confusing to those whom the institution most wanted to help.

A large meeting room with high ceilings considered desirable by those with eyesight proved to be an acoustical nightmare for the Center's clients, because the lack of sound reflections inside made the space difficult to navigate.

Eager to give the institution a fresh image, the center's 75-member board four years ago planned a new building that would have cost \$27 million.

When that project failed to generate philanthropic enthusiasm, the center asked Galvin - a board member who contributed his design services for free - to see what he could do to transform the existing complex from within.

The Center has since raised \$8 million of the \$9.8 million it needs for the renovation. It now wants to complete fundraising for construction, plus raise another \$5 million to add to its \$75 million endowment, said **Executive Director Steven Friedman**.

While construction is under way, the Center is providing basic services at the Rockefeller Pointe Building at 2490 Lee Blvd. in Cleveland Heights. Its preschool and call center have moved temporarily to

the Coventry Elementary School at Euclid Heights Boulevard in Cleveland Heights.



A rendering shows the new look of the Cleveland Sight Center's entrance lobby.

(Image by Vocon)

A native of Cleveland, Galvin, 68, studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania under teachers including Louis Kahn, one of America's greatest 20th century architects. "He was a poet," Galvin said of Kahn. "Listening to him was like hearing a language nobody else spoke."

After serving two years in the Air Force, Galvin returned to Cleveland in 1972 with his wife, Shelly, and established his firm, Galvin Design, specializing in commercial and retail interiors.

Galvin merged the four-member firm with Vocon in 2003. Vocon has since grown quickly from 22 to 115 employees in Cleveland and New York.

The firm is known for interiors with a svelte and sexy contemporary look, and for flexible, wide open office settings designed to foster collaboration and teamwork.

Galvin brought those values to the Sight Center. But he first had to abandon fancy proposals intended to help the blind, such as the installation of a wireless system with portable high-tech gadgets that would beep and tell people where they were in the building.

"When we started this process, we imagined all kinds of technology to allow people to get around easily," Galvin said.

But Leanza, who serves on the **Sight Center's Consumer Council**, a group of blind and visually impaired clients, said they rejected Galvin's initial proposals.

He also helped Galvin to see what it really means to be blind.

"The worst thing is the permanence and irreversibility of it," Leanza said. Given that reality, the most important thing for someone who is blind is to strive for independence. Accordingly, he encouraged Galvin to come up with a design based on a kind of architectural tough love.

Galvin said that talking to Leanza "was a lightbulb-coming-on situation." It showed him that instead of imagining what it might be like to be blind, the most important thing was to listen to those who are.

Galvin's pro bono work for the Sight Center is rooted in part in the Jewish religious concept of tikkun olam - Hebrew for the notion that the world is broken and that one's responsibility is to repair it.

Galvin is also motivated to help others by the care his daughter Katie received at Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital after she was diagnosed with a rare and virulent pediatric bone cancer. Katie died in 1984 at age 13.

The Galvins' other child, Michael, lives in Philadelphia with his wife and two daughters.

At Vocon, Galvin has volunteered to design interiors for places of healing in Cleveland including the Gathering Place, a cancer support center; a courtyard at Rainbow; cottages for the Children's Aid Society; and the downtown offices of the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center.

On the subject of his daughter's death, Galvin's emotions are still raw 27 years later. He can't mention it without welling up.

"Losing her was what taught me what's really important," he said. "I'm in the true make-a-difference part of my life and it's amazing. I consider it my good fortune, and if what we do is helpful, it's a huge opportunity."