
Challenges and Satisfaction:

A glimpse into creative healthcare interior design

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Quick — how many facilities can you think of that are used 24/7, 365 days per year? Perhaps your first thought was of a few megastore or convenience-store chains. Or maybe a prison. Recently, I traveled to Las Vegas, and have added casinos to the list.

Most important on the list are hospitals. Fortunately for us, hospitals never close. Yet being open all the time takes its toll on the facility, as a wide range of workers are always on the job. It also poses maintenance challenges, because cleaning and other work needs to be done while care-related functions continue. These are just a few of the many challenges facing healthcare interior design today.



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There are a host of codes and regulations that must be adhered to, such as Public Health codes, Fire Marshal codes, HIPAA/privacy issues, and infection-control constraints, just to name a few.

In hospitals, there are people's emotions at every level — from the extreme joy at the birth of a healthy baby, to the extreme grief of a loved one's sudden and tragic death.

There are facility users of all sorts: staff, doctors, patients, visitors, volunteers, consultants, sales representatives, delivery personnel, and clergy.

There is every level of education and every level of job — from housekeeping to brain surgery and everything in between.

And of course, there are budgets!

Armed with all of these challenges, the healthcare client comes to the interior designer and says, "Here you go. Oh, and by the way, be creative! Make our space flexible for uses we don't even know about

yet. Make our space functional and beautiful and life enhancing. Help us create a space that we can use to recruit and retain staff, and use for marketing our services in this extremely competitive market."

Delivering effective and appealing solutions to these challenges is very satisfying, and for me, being able to affect someone's healthcare experience in a positive way is as good as it gets.

Given these parameters, where does a healthcare interior designer start? With communication. First and foremost, talking with a client to gain an understanding of their facility, their needs, and their expectations is key. After that, the interior designer must develop ideas and options for further consideration. Most often, these ideas manifest as themes that offer a meaningful story for the healthcare facility.

Inspiration can come at any time from any place. For one project, I was inspired by a book that a facility used in its leadership training. "The Man Who Planted Trees" talked about a shepherd who planted 100 acorns each day for 40 years, transforming a barren land into a lush forest. The hospital admired the shepherd's many qualities — such as caring, patience, persistence, and commitment — and wanted to use this as an example of how one person has the ability and power to make a profound difference to their surroundings. An indomitable spirit of committed people can make a visible and tangible difference in the world. These were important characteristics for the hospital leadership to have.

With this as a starting point, I thought of an acorn and what it becomes in the future: a tree. A "tree of life" as a metaphor for the hospital was very fitting. I took it one step further and thought, what do we love about trees in West

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Michigan? Trees change dramatically with the changing seasons. Next, I had to translate this into a tangible design concept. I did this by dividing the floor plan into four areas, one for each season. I used blue and green (basic colors found in nature) as the mainstay color palette to unify the space, then changed accent colors and patterns to reflect each season. To facilitate wayfinding in the facility, I used icons such as an acorn, a leaf, a flower, and the sun. This created an environment

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that was both appropriate and meaningful to this particular healthcare facility.

This is just one example of how interior design can be used to personalize and give meaning to a healthcare facility. To stay competitive in a fiercely competitive market is no small task. Smartly planned interior design can support a facility's vision to be a destination of choice. **MIBIZ**

Mary Bamborough, IIDA, has 17 years of healthcare interior design experience.