



Seeking out spiritual spaces

by Jeff Monzu | Photos by Tom Kessler

Whether the space is a
chapel or a meditation room,
care might also depend on faith

There is no longer any real question in the scientific and medical world; faith and spirituality often do play a role in health and healing, and that role may be more significant than previously understood. New research is showing that spirituality may indeed impact health. No less a mainstream publication than *Time* magazine recently reported that the connection between spirituality and getting well are being scientifically demonstrated. As reported there, Dr. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Spirituality and the Mind said, "A large body of science shows a positive impact of religion on health."

While the connection between belief and health is not without its detractors, there is little question that in the hospital environment faith, spirituality and religious experience often are enmeshed with the joy of healing and the emotional turbulence of serious illness. Many families will face questions about a loved one's health for the first time while in a hospital setting. While receiving news about a family member's health may be difficult or happy, hospitals are the place where that news often is delivered; in some sense, the hospital has a role as the first emotional responder, both in joy and sorrow.

Architecture is more than building

These two realities — the efficacy of the spiritual element in healing and the role of the healthcare facility in supporting it — naturally lead to several questions for the healthcare architect. What role does healthcare architecture play in integrating the spiritual and the religious in healing? Do for-profit hospitals need to address the spiritual as well as nonprofit, religious-based organizations? Is simply inserting a chapel or meditation room into leftover space in the hospital really addressing spiritual needs or is something more needed?

Certainly the pressures of allocating space in a hospital and budgetary discipline must inform any programmatic or architectural choice. But an appropriate role for the healthcare architect is the consideration, even the recognition, that emotional responses to the environments we design can facilitate or hinder the ultimate mission of every hospital — healing people and their families. Without question the lowering of stress and the lessening of anxiety facilitate well-being, and in those capacities the architect can have a significant role.



The Nebraska Medical Center, Clarkson Tower in Omaha, Neb., demonstrates the use of formal spiritual space in a hospital chapel: Intimate and personal.

Chapels

Chapels are normally thought of as the place where spirit and medicine overlap in the hospital. For many patients and their families, chapels will continue to be the physical embodiment of faith and religion. Chapels, although less formal than a church, synagogue or mosque, must still present a spiritual structure. The design of a chapel clearly conveys some type of spirituality to a patient or family member. Cultural cues familiar to people create a space that provides serenity; imagery and symbolism also may be used to create a sense of 'sacredness.'

Perhaps above all, the chapel is an oasis from the activity, bustle, and at times, sensory overload of a hospital. Where the hospital may appear clinical or even cold, the chapel must portray warmth and peace. The choice of architectural materials is important in this regard; wood, fabrics and carpeting are intuitively more inviting than vinyl composition tile. Lighting also is a significant differentiator between the chapel and the hospital at large. Softer lighting by its nature creates a sense of quiet and reflection. The selection of furniture has an impact; this is no place for institutional-looking stacking chairs. Furniture should be comfortable and easily reconfigured for large and small groups or even private contemplation. The chapel should have easy access from public spaces; at the same time, it must have acoustic separation from other hospital functions.

Budgetary pressure will affect chapel design. Hospital design is primarily determined by economic realities, and space is allocated in accordance with its revenue generating capacity. Of course, chapels don't directly provide revenue, so the case must be made that patient satisfaction is directly impacted by attending to the spiritual as well as physical well-being of patients and their families. That spiritual sense may be most evident in a chapel, but it does not end there.

Consultation/grieving rooms

Often overlooked or an afterthought, consultation or grieving rooms are an important component of delivering healthcare. Ever sat in a waiting room and overheard a surgeon give difficult news to a family only a few feet away? It is uncomfortable, to say the least, and everyone's pain is magnified. Consultation/grieving rooms, the small, private rooms that can be used for emotion-laden conversations or private sorrow, should



At Alegent Health Lakeside Hospital in Omaha, Neb., natural light is used to create an open and uplifting space. Stained glass insets in the railing system throw colored light accents throughout the space.



At Alegent Health Bergan Mercy Medical Center in Omaha, Neb., the use of stained glass windows gives an indirect feeling of spiritual space.

be a part of every hospital's space program. They provide dignity and solace in times of extreme difficulty.

Public spaces

Public spaces, too, can imbue a spiritual tone as well. Lobbies and entrances set the tone for the entire hospital and can create a sense of emotional and spiritual health. We've all seen the dark, crowded lobby that was nothing more than a passage to an institutional looking reception desk. It's hard to think of a less humanizing way to welcome patients or visitors to a hospital.

Light and openness suggest themselves as architectural elements to create a lobby that says, "Welcome, we're here to take good care of you." Atrium-type lobbies lend themselves to that; more than that an atrium as an architectural feature shows the visitor connections to the rest of the hospital and provides an orienting function. Natural light, creating a connection to the outside world, is an essential in an atrium space. The lobby is a public space, so revenue enhancers such as gift shops and coffee bars easily can be incorporated into its design.

But lobbies can and should have smaller, more private areas, too. This may be accomplished with something as simple as furniture arrangements or with architectural features such as low partition walls. Sculpture, artwork or a water feature can transform a lobby into vibrant, hope-filled space and direct the visitor's thoughts to positive channels. Various lighting levels should be designed into the lobby; while daylighting enlivens an atrium, sensitive illumination at night can transform a space. Light used effectively contributes to the spiritual sense of place and the message of 'caring.' The days of a uniform wash of harsh fluorescent lighting should be banished.

Challenges to architect, health administrators

The trade-off and natural tension between the economics of hospital construction and the less tangible payback of spiritual spaces form a challenge for the hospital administration and architectural team. In facilities with an overt religious basis, this tension may be easier to negotiate, but in any setting the architect



should expect to 'make the case' that the spiritual dimension ultimately is a plus to the overall function and performance of the hospital.

Sterile, lifeless and spiritually-devoid hospitals simply are a vestige of the past. Much scientific research supports the connection between faith, religion or spirituality in the healing process. Architects and hospital administrators can, and should, be in the forefront of demonstrating their understanding of this exciting reality. Spiritual spaces, while they do indirectly add to the bottom line, are most compellingly a part of the design of excellence in healthcare. ■

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