

Health Care

# Architects find link between design and recovery

## Patients seek healthy surroundings in hospitals

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Special to The Daily Reporter

Martha Gaines isn't an architect. Her experience with health care design is more personal. Gaines is a cancer survivor. She's spent hours, even days, in sterile, depressing environments confronting a disease that threatened her life.

She was treated in Madison, Houston, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York City and Santa Monica, Calif. Every hospital, she said, shared a systematic disconnection with the outside world.

"Most health care facilities are not designed for patients, they're not designed for healing," Gaines said. "I don't think they're designed for providers, either."

That's changing. A boom in health construction in the past decade has given a facelift to the glaring white hallways and booming overhead pagers that are often associated with hospitals and clinics.

Designers are switching to earth-toned colors, natural lighting and patient-centered rooms, said Kristin Dufek, senior design architect for Eppstein Uhen Architects, Milwaukee. Dufek oversees a staff of 22 that worked for ProHealth Care, Wheaton-Franciscan Health Care and Edgerton Hospital.

"Not only are staff thinking about patients and how they heal and recover,"

"Most health care facilities are not designed for patients, they're not designed for healing."

Martha Gaines

she said, "they're humanizing the health care environment and making better environments for staff."

One simple example is noise, Dufek said. Hospitals are inherently stressful places full of scared patients and overworked staff. The traditional model had nurses and doctors running every-where, announcements going off every couple of minutes and patients searching for a few quiet moments.

Modern designs are avoiding paging systems and replacing them with phones that won't disrupt patients.

"The typically hectic pace is greatly reduced by removing the background interference," Dufek said.

Other design changes let hospitals distribute medicines more efficiently and bring X-ray machines to patients instead of forcing them to walk throughout the hospital for tests.

As for the rooms, designers are softening the appearance of medical equipment by building them into cabinets and generally making them less obtrusive, Dufek said. Though relatively minor, the affect is to create a more soothing environment for patients and their families.

From there, the hope is, healing can occur.

"A lot of routine staff things are being simplified," Dufek said, "which, in turn, makes it friendlier for patients."

Across the country, health care systems are spending billions of dollars building



new clinics and hospitals to prepare for the aging baby boomers. Hospitals in Boston and Williamsburg, Va., are transforming their buildings into natural art installations designed to soothe patients, while a new hospital in Wyoming features flat-screen TVs and sofa-sleepers in patient rooms.

Even floors are getting attention, Dufek said. Health care facilities are installing wood floors to give people a sense of home.

"We're trying to create a more residential feel," she said.

Along with being a patient, Gaines is also a law professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She founded the Center for Patient Partnerships, which advocates for people in the health care system. The center also teaches college students across disciplines — from social work and medicine to engineering and architecture — how to advocate for healing environments.

Gaines said when she walks into a hospital, her first question is: "Can healing happen here?"

What she's looking for is a building that connects patients with the natural world instead of locking people away in the circuits of medical processing.

Healing "needs to be done in an environment that feels beautiful, supportive and comforting," she said. "Not something that feels vinyl, fluorescent and in your face."

Gaines said she's hopeful about the direction health care design is going, but she added that more could be done to include patients in the design process. While health care companies hand out surveys, they rarely sit down and make a concerted effort to understand what patients really need.

"There's no mechanism for gathering input," she said about health care companies. "The shoe industry gathers input on their product. How much do they spend?"

Without talking to patients, there's a risk of swinging too far in another direction, Gaines said. For example, at a cancer center she worried that new designs will include private stations for

patients to receive treatments, but remove the community spaces that let cancer patients bond and support each other.

The design firms are listening. Eppstein Uhen recently designed a cancer center

that included private and public spaces for patients receiving treatment, Dufek said.

"What we're learning," she said, "is the health care environment needs to be a lot more flexible and adaptable."



When you come right down to it  
it's really quite simple ...

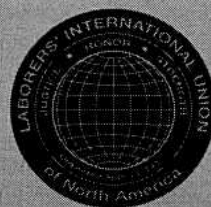
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