

Design Trends in Medical Office Construction

By Mark Alexander, CCIM

I had lunch recently with Ft. Myers architect Bruce Gora to research this article. His firm "Gora McGahey" has worked on 85 medical office building projects to date, including 26 different types of medical specialties. Bruce said there is a "Zen-like approach" to today's new medical office designs. The goal is to create a more comfortable, relaxing environment for patients. This often includes inviting colors with clean geometric lines and soothing sounds of waterfalls.

According to Google, the aim of Zen is to discover your inherent wisdom (or Buddha nature) within yourself through meditation and mindfulness of daily experiences that lead to new perspectives and insights on existence. Zen is inner discovery through introspection that is said to "turn the eye inward". One of the first fathers or teachers of Zen Buddhism was an Indian Monk named Bodhidharma who spent several decades living in a cave, staring at a cave wall, meditating. Finally, patients staring for hours at waiting room walls across America as they wait to see their doctor....have someone they can learn from as a mentor in the form of this fifth century monk.

Since we apparently can't figure out how to get the vast majority of patients in front of their doctors within 20 minutes of their scheduled appointments, I think it is a great idea to create a more relaxing environment in the waiting room. We have much to learn "Grasshopper". By the way, years after Bodhidharma left his cave; he is believed to have taught a series of exercises to Monks in a Shaolin Temple in China. This became the basis for the Shaolin Martial Arts that gained fame in the USA with the old TV Series Kung Fu.

I guess it is possible to build up aggression, depression or fear while sitting in a doctor's waiting room while you are ill, staring at a wall for a long time. So here are the latest design trends being used by medical office building developers to make your stay more pleasant than Bodhidharma's cave.

Waiting rooms are becoming bigger and nicer. Families often bring their sick or injured relative to the hospital creating a need for larger

WR's. The aim is to visually bring the outdoors inside the waiting room by use of more and bigger windows. More evolved outdoor landscaping is the counterpart to bigger exterior windows. Indoor landscaped atriums are also used with success to create interior courtyards. Harsh direct lighting can give you a headache and cause aggravation. So today's medical office designs effectively use soft lighting and sometimes back-lit nature scenes on walls or ceilings. The tone is set as soon as you enter the waiting room by use of high end construction materials such as soothing wood floors with inviting color schemes. The trend is toward more modern interior designs with simple clean lines. Many hospitals prefer aquariums in their palatial sized waiting rooms as a means of bringing nature up close and personal to their patients. I suspect Bodhidharma might have stayed cave bound even longer if he had a goldfish looking back at him. The calming sounds of a running waterfall are often used in new waiting rooms today. The easy way to make a WR less like a cave is to give it a soaring high ceiling. More comfortable padded chairs make for a homey feeling. Since anxiety is often high when patients come to a doctor's office, today's effective design has a calming effect using a combination of light, sound and textures to make you feel more at home. Some doctors even use comedy to get you smiling in waiting rooms today. Dr. Larry Hobbs has only comedy shows playing on his waiting room TV at the Urgent Care Center of Southwest Florida at their Cay West Shopping Center location on Cape Coral Parkway.

Will you see a lot of these changes at your doctor's office on your next visit? I doubt it. Remember, this is new construction we are discussing. There are plenty of older generation medical office buildings that are quite functional that have not been upgraded yet with all the latest bells and whistles. Medical office design trends develop slowly over time. It is not a switch that gets turned and then suddenly all medical offices have the latest and greatest designs.

Open end designs with efficient use of space are very important for new medical office designs today. When designing a new exam room, the question should be asked, "Will this exam room remain an exam room for the next 10 or 20 years or will it have a future reversionary use as the medical business landscape changes? The open end design gives flexibility to make changes to floor plans as

business needs change. Future adaptability is an important consideration when planning the design of today's current medical use. We can't always see around corners but we can anticipate future change.

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