

Common Sense Aesthetics for Cancer Centers

by Mark Herman



THE CURRENT FOCUS on making aesthetics and comfort a priority in the design of cancer centers is sound, both from a financial and patient care/marketing point of view. Aesthetic factors don't significantly drive up costs; that's done by the big equipment (linear accelerators, IMRT systems) and the "infrastructure" equipment, such as hoods, vital sign machines, and sinks in every exam room. Even giving every nurse a computer and a good chair is cost effective, since satisfied employees do not change jobs and staff turnover costs are reduced. Cancer centers get into trouble with aesthetics and comfort elements when they make choices that don't put function first or acknowledge the fact that their clients are ill and may be immunosuppressed.

Patients want warm, inviting, non-sterile spaces. Staff members want decompression rooms away from patient view, ergonomic work areas, and a building designed to promote easy circulation and work flow. Physicians want private offices where they can display personal mementos and express their human side to patients, plus a clinic with a centralized design and fully-stocked exam rooms. It's easy to give everyone what they want, as long as the designer remembers that what is being built is a treatment facility, not a hotel.

Nature spaces are fine, but leave them outdoors and put in large, panoramic windows. Plants in pots can be watered once a week. Plants in ground soil grow much faster, need constant care, and promote the proliferation of bugs, molds, and allergens. A pot plant that hasn't been trimmed simply overflows its container and looks exuberant. A ground plant that gets away from its caretakers looks overgrown and messy, encroaches on treatment space, and spreads contaminants in rooms that should be sterile for health reasons. Put nature murals in treatment spaces and let your garden be a recreational area patients can visit when they are well enough.

Fish tanks, unless they are meticulously cleaned, look depressing and breed bacteria at an alarming rate.

Natural light is wonderful, especially in reception areas, but incandescent lights (not fluorescents) are warmer and make people's skin look better. Use them in treatment spaces. If patients look their best, they automatically feel better.

Both staff and patients want an environment that does not remind them of where they are, but amenities such as wood floors should never be used in treatment areas. Put in vinyl-impregnated wood flooring or colorful linoleum that can be kept clean. Wooden walls, no matter how beautiful, should not be used in any space where blood or other body fluids might spatter.

Use color generously and inventively. Make each exam room a different hue and coordinate the accents

like chairs, flooring, and light fixtures. The variety is fun and can take patients' minds off their difficulties. Institutional pastels are depressing and many elderly clients have trouble seeing them. Use deeper, more intense tones that can both soothe and energize, and extend them to the halls to keep people oriented. The red hall, the blue hall, and the yellow hall that have distinctive borders, color-matched dots on the floor, and special light fixtures can tell people where they are and help them navigate your center with confidence.

Design the facility to include as many patient choices as possible. Personal televisions and individually controlled lighting, sound, and temperature in treatment areas are always welcome. If you cannot install multiple thermostats, put in a heated blanket rack so patients can keep themselves comfortable without ringing for a nurse during infusion sessions. One center we designed had a treatment area that was built in a circle. The glass-enclosed nursing station was in the center with infusion chairs, storage areas, and bathrooms around it. One side was quieter, the other side more community oriented. With no walls to limit flexibility, the center could make maximum use of its space and doubled the number of its infusion chairs.

A new design factor is ensuring compliance with the HIPAA regulations. The center's spaces must be arranged to facilitate efficient workflow, but patients should be kept from circulating in areas where information is stored. Talk to the center staff about what sort of facility they enjoy. Some groups want zone definitions: exam areas and treatment areas that are separate with the administrative area connecting them. Other groups want less definition between spaces but more private patient rooms within the spaces themselves. Some centers want to limit the number of family members that accompany patients because extra people impede treatment, and other work groups (as well as most patients) say the more the merrier. Strike a balance between patient and staff needs, then add the safeguards that will make HIPAA compliance easy to achieve.

Making a beautiful, comfortable, and efficient space in which people with cancer can receive treatment is a combination of good common sense, respect for medical and scientific standards, imagination, and sensitivity. A good design will include all of these factors, plus the individual touches that make the staff feel like the center is an expression of their particular brand of caring and dedication. 📌

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