

Prognosis: Smashing

Doctors and dentists seek out those other pros - designers - to bring color, calm, and comfort into their offices.

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Aside from a colorful stack of magazines, a TV in the corner, and a touch of Muzak for ambience, doctors' offices have never been known for their design IQ. In fact, the nicest thing you might call them is, well, sterile.

And although hospitals have invested in good design for many years now, individual medical professionals are giving aesthetics a second opinion, too, recognizing that a well-designed space can calm nerves and ease anxiety - as well as attract new patients. That means considering an MRI patient's point of view (and installing LED lights on the ceiling for entertainment), or including a parent waiting area that overlooks an outdoor playspace.

"I think the Starbucks and Barnes & Nobles of the world have shown us that people want comfortable places where they can multitask," said Mimi Campbell Leitzel of MCL Interiors in Wyndmoor. She helped orthodontist Stephen Slawek pick wall color, fabrics, and flooring for his two-year-old Lafayette Hill practice in a 300-year-old building that patients travel to from as far away as Princeton.

The goal: to make patients comfortable while providing a variety of spaces for accompanying parents and siblings.

Deborah Nelson of Glenside has two children in the practice. "His old office [in Chestnut Hill] was like a typical doctor's office. Now it is very calming, hip, and comfortable. I love the colors, and I love that it is so light-filled."

Before Leitzel got involved, Slawek took on much of the construction himself: In his makeshift home workshop, he created banquettes and window seats so parents could watch as their children were treated. He designed and constructed the reception desk and homework bar where at 3 p.m. clients are lined up with their notebooks out. He kept the original built-in cabinets in rooms that date to 1742 and installed tray ceilings.



Individual waiting rooms at Colon Health Center have TVs, warm pebble wallcoverings, benches with mosaic tile bases.

'No, you have to let me help you,' " said Leitzel, who mostly designs residential spaces but had also designed a dentist's office.

So she picked soothing sky blues for the tray ceiling and seat-cushion fabrics that complement the aqua examining chairs - much of the color scheme inspired by a recent family trip to the Atlantis resort in the Bahamas.

It "gave us the reference for the Caribbean feel, with British colonial and traditional accents that Dr. Slawek gravitates toward," Leitzel said of the overall palette that includes raspberry, coral, blue, and green accents.

For other doctors' offices, the top mission is to calm nerves.

That was the case at the Colon Health Center in Newark, Del., where physician Amy Patrick enlisted the help of Michele Yurick of M. Yurick Designs in Malvern. Yurick

The waiting area, with floor-to-ceiling windows, overlooks a fenced backyard. "Parents come out to watch [their children] or can do the same from the inside, or they can take business calls outside with more privacy," Slawek said of the WiFi-outfitted office. "I have four kids, so I know what it is like to be in a small waiting area."

All the exam rooms have fireplaces, which Slawek milled himself; in the future, a flat-screen TV will sit atop each one. Upstairs in a large, open exam area is a brushing station with a mirrored wall so Slawek and his patients wearing braces can see if they are brushing properly. Office manager Cynthia Jones found the mirrors at Crate & Barrel, and the whimsical animal statues housed in some of the rooms were a find from Florida.

"The kids love them. It makes the office fun," Slawek said.

Despite his carpentry prowess, Slawek was stumped when it came to things like paint and fabrics. He told Leitzel, one of his patients' parents, that he planned to paint the space white or beige. "I said,



Consultation rooms at Colon Health Center feature curved tables, framed shell art. "The spirit of our place is prevention and wellness and the interior design helps promote that," says physician Amy Patrick. Says the designer: "It gets [patients'] minds off of the procedure."

already had designed three other dentist offices on the East Coast, including Jeffrey Bellisario's in Ardmore.

High-anxiety exams, like colon-cancer screenings, are regularly performed at the health center, so the two agreed a spacelike, "unmedical" setting would help relax patients. In the room that takes "virtual colonoscopies" - no IV or anesthesia required - patients have to stare at the ceiling, so Yurick created a light show of sorts that includes a rainbow spectrum of LEDs in soothing colors. It was a technical challenge, but Yurick believes she, along with the contractors, succeeded.

"It gets [patients'] minds off of the procedure," she said.

For after the exam, Yurick designed individual waiting rooms with TVs, warm pebble wallcoverings, and comfortable benches with mosaic tile bases. She also hung small capiz shell pendants in each room.

"The spirit of our place is prevention and wellness and the interior design helps promote that," said Patrick. "Our goal with this setting was to reassure people that screening is not difficult or scary."

The office waiting room has a similar vibe, with recycled glass tile decorating the reception desk, along with amber glass lights. In consultation rooms, Yurick designed custom glass tables with mottled amber bases and hung framed shell art on the walls.

Leitzel expects more doctors to make their office environment a priority.

"The standards are higher now as people are more educated to expect 'designed' spaces," Leitzel said. "For the physician, it's a balance between providing the good design in a cost-competitive way. It provides a great workplace for their employees, and a place for them to do what they do best."



At Colon Health Center, physician Amy Patrick stands beneath a decorated ceiling in a room where "virtual colonoscopies" are done. Designer Michele Yurick created a light show of sorts with colored LEDs.