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Health By Design

Marmon Mok architect on why environments matter in patient outcomes

BY KATHLEEN PETTY



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Receiving the right treatment while in the hospital is obviously key to a full recovery, but so too is the actual room in which care is delivered. That's where Tiffany Robinson Long and the health care team at Marmon Mok come in.

Long, who in 2017 became the first female in San Antonio to be board certified by the American College of Healthcare Architects, says research shows that everything from the colors around patients to the space available for their families can impact healing. "It applies in every aspect of architecture, but health care is where your most fragile people are," Long says. "They're not able to just get up and leave if they don't like an environment."

Long's clients have included the Polytrauma Rehab Center at the VA hospital, Clarity Child Guidance Center and others, and she's currently working on projects at the Mays Cancer Center at UT Health and at Children's Hospital of San Antonio, where they're creating palliative care suites with the Gus Owen Stephens

Foundation. Here are some of her keys for designing with health in mind:

Outdoor Connection

While patients are in the hospital, providing natural light, views of nature and access to the outdoors (plus fresh air) is crucial to promoting wellness. Long says research has repeatedly shown that people have an innate tendency to seek out connections to nature, so at the UT Health Center for Oral Health glass and windows are prominent features, while a large exterior courtyard features greenery and seating.

Color Matters

Recent case studies have shown that wall paint and artwork that are heavy in greens and blues—such as nature-driven photos—are more soothing than something with bright colors or abstract designs, which may have a negative impact particularly on patients taking certain medications.

Material Consideration

Accents like hospital room tables and waiting room chairs are selected in styles more similar to what you'd expect in a hotel rather than a decades-old hospital. "We're trying to get away from the institutional look," Long says, explaining that it can intimidate patients. "So we take principles from hotels and other hospitality-driven places." Picking the right material is also not just about aesthetics. Long says they carefully examine materials for durability because chips in furniture are breeding grounds for bacteria—a major risk especially for those who are immune compromised like anyone undergoing chemotherapy treatments.

Family Ties

Long says the patient-family centered model of care means both creating space for relatives and crafting places that are comfortable. Allowing for family in hospital rooms reduces the number of falls because patients aren't left alone. It also provides a sense of calm that's conducive to healing. At UT Health, being family friendly extends beyond hospital rooms, too. Long helped create a family center that includes a teaching kitchen to help prepare families and patients for supporting new healthy habits at home, a resource center for research, a multipurpose room for yoga and couches for relaxing. At Children's Hospital of San Antonio, where they're working on palliative care suites, designs call for sitting rooms with kitchenettes and tables so families can meet with doctors in comfortable settings rather than cold conference rooms.