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Ellerbe Becket, U of M partner on healing-spaces lecture series

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When you walk into a hospital, chances are you can accurately guess when it was built.

Hospitals built between the 1940s and 1960s tend to be stark, utilitarian buildings unless they've been renovated. More-modern health care institutions have a marked difference. Art on the walls, natural light flowing through windows and nursing stations sprinkled throughout each unit are all signs the building has been designed with healing spaces in mind.

Healing spaces in health care institutions is an idea with legs -- so much so that Ellerbe Becket, a Minneapolis-based architecture, engineering and design firm, has teamed up with the Center for Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota to present the first annual Ellerbe Becket Optimal Healing Environments Lecture Series. The series was designed for health professionals, as well as professionals and students in the architecture and design field.

The first event, held in May, featured a presentation by Dr. Eve Edelstein titled "Creating Healing Spaces: Neuroscience and Architecture." The event was so popular it had to be moved to a larger space to fit the 400 people in attendance. The second lecture is slated for Oct. 28 and will feature environmental psychologist Craig Zimring from the Georgia Institute of Technology. Organizers are preparing for even more attendees at the fall event.

"Over the next five to 10 years, billions of health care dollars will be spent on health care facilities," said Mary Jo Kreitzer, founder and director of the Center for Spirituality and Healing. "There is a great amount of interest in creating optimal healing environments. We bring together architects and designers with health care professionals to talk about how to create these spaces. The very basic design principle is form follows function and the design world is saying that research shows what kind of spaces and design factors facilitate healing."

Kreitzer co-teaches a graduate course in Optimal Healing Environments with Terri Zborowsky, director of health care education and research for Ellerbe Becket. Together

they educate scores of architecture and design students on the principles behind healing spaces, as well as the business sense behind the concept.

According to Kreitzer, the five general areas in creating optimal healing environments are to create spaces with a connection to nature, more patient options and choices to provide a sense of control, pleasant diversions and positive distractions such as fish tanks or aviaries, space for social support from families, spouses and friends and a reduction in environmental stressors such as noise and glaring light.

"These things make good business sense and help attract market share," Kreitzer said. "A healing environment can lead to better patient outcomes and help attract and retain staff. Woodwinds Health Campus [in Woodbury] was built with optimal healing in mind and they have a waiting list of nurses wanting to work there."

Zborowsky heads up the health care community outreach and in-house research functions at Ellerbe Becket. "We were the original designers of the Mayo Clinic and 60 to 70 percent of the practice is health-care-related. We look at innovations in the health care industry to bring to the client, not just to build a better building," she said.

The firm funds its own research and also participates in peer-reviewed research. "We're moving academic research into practice. Years ago there was a study on [the prevalence of] hospital infections. That was really the call to arms to look at internal practice and design. Design follows operations and we're active at keeping research in practice to improve design decision making."

A recent Ellerbe Becket study focused on the effect of decentralized nursing stations on the work environment and perception of the environment. It was determined that a great deal of a nurse's time was spent walking. Design solutions included reducing walking distances for nursing staff, using ergonomic design at nursing stations and reducing factors such as noise and glare. "If you reduce those things, you reduce burnout," Zborowsky said.

With health care becoming even more of a focus nationwide, the second lecture in the Healing Environments series is poised for high attendance this fall. The explanation for the interest, according to Zborowsky, is simple.

"In hospitals patients die, families grieve, they experience traumas and extreme joy at births. They're really micro worlds where people work 24 hours a day and never leave. We have to look carefully at the spaces we're providing."

Lynne Stansvik is a freelance writer.

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