



Healing Properties

Guenther Petrarca considered patients' physical, emotional, and spiritual needs in its design for the Continuum Center for Health and Healing in New York.

By Jen Renzi

BETH ISRAEL'S NEW Continuum Center for Health and Healing aspires to redefine medical care by attending to all facets of a patient's well-being: mind, body, and spirit. The combined clinic and research/education center offers conventional Western therapies, indigenous Tibetan, Chinese, and Ayurvedic traditions, and such alternative modalities as meditation and hypnosis. To develop a non-traditional atmosphere that places patients in an appropriate mindset to heal, Dr. Woodson Merrell and Barbara Glickstein of Beth Israel turned to Guenther Petrarca, a firm with extensive experience in environmentally responsible health care design.

For the 12,000-sq.-ft. New York facility, Guenther Petrarca developed a unique model—a “healing environment”—that departs dramatically from the residential, commercial, and institutional conventions that typically inform health care design. “The space feels organic,” says co-partner Robin Guenther, “with a lack of heavy detailing and gridding. Everything is quite subtle and informal. It

also makes a connection to nature.” Although Guenther often encourages clients towards earth-friendly design, “this was the first time that a client actually challenged us to go further.” The designers selected only natural and recycled materials such as vegetable-dyed wool, cork, and wood fiber acoustical tiles to ensure minimal toxicity to the human body as well as to Mother Earth. Concrete, limestone, and linoleum floors were installed to optimize air quality. Even construction methods were environmentally sound. To account for this rigorous approach, Guenther explains that many patients seek alternatives “as a result of illnesses caused by environmental issues that Western medicine has not been successful in healing.”

Feng shui expert Alex Stark consulted on the layout, which reflects the center’s philosophy of patient empowerment and harnesses positive energy. “We wanted to make it very clear that authority rested with the patient,” says Stark, who designated the floor’s northwest corner, representing authority and leadership, as the waiting area. The 24 consultation and examination rooms—including OB/Gyn stations—look north, the direction of healing, and east, symbolizing new beginnings. Administrative offices span the south side to foster communication and insight. The sequenced organization of the floor plan “slows people down, allowing them to leave the city behind and refocus” on their personal health. In the arrival corridor, polished plaster walls subtly darken, and limestone tiles progressively diminish in scale, to “decelerate” patients as they approach check-in. Visitors pass through floor-to-ceiling metal-coil curtains into an egg-shaped reception cove, where punches of green and marigold are mellowed by black walnut woodwork. The waiting area completes the tone with antique-inspired furniture, ample foliage, and whitewashed views of the Manhattan skyline through sheer draperies. Patients should be fully at ease by the time they are led to their treatment rooms, which open off a hallway lined with waxed cork flooring, “warm, and a little bit soft underfoot.” Horizontal bands of rich black walnut are backed by frosted glass, filtering light into the corridor. The details blend into an inviting, spa-like atmosphere that serves as a welcome antidote to the hurried, clinical feel of traditional medical facilities. ◆

