



SUSTAINABLE COMMERCIAL INTERIORS

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The reception area is located apart from the waiting room, in a circular room that is easily accessible. Patients entering the center are immediately greeted with warm and organic materials designed to calm and soothe. © Peter Mauss/Esto

Continuum Center: Natural Healing

The design of the Continuum Center for Health and Healing was a watershed project for Guenther5 Architects and Beth Israel Medical Center, both located in New York. The health center took a leap of faith when opening this 10,000-square-foot healing center in midtown Manhattan, offering alternative medicine to its patients; the design firm, meanwhile, traveled a path paved with new principles of healing design never before put into practice. In the end, both achieved the desired objective: an award-winning space filled with warm colors, organic materials, and an empowering design that enhances patients' physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Explains Robin Guenther, principal and founder of Guenther5 Architects, "Patients really understand that the space feels different—the air 'tastes different.' The operable windows, even though it's in the middle of Manhattan, are well used and often opened."

The Continuum Center offers acupuncture, massage therapy, chiropractors, nutritionists, and other nontradi-

tional treatments; as such, it desired that the overall space and internal structures be the antithesis of the mainstream waiting room (sterile and "medical"), seeking instead a space that would be interactive and relaxing. Here, the waiting room serves as a multifunctional space for patients to talk with and learn from one another, an experience facilitated by a large meeting table for group learning, a resource area, individual lounge seats, and Web-ready computer stations. In another departure from tradition, the reception area is located in a circular room that is easily accessible from the waiting area but out of direct view.

Feng Shui Influences

Contributing a significant influence to the design parameters was the introduction of **feng shui** principles throughout the entire space. Collaborating with **feng shui** master **Alex Stark**, Guenther5 was able to establish construction and design principles that optimized the spaces' potential. **Feng shui** is an ancient Chinese art built on the belief that *qi*—the vital life force pervasive throughout the universe and existing in all living things—can be affected by the external environment. The Continuum Center chose to

adopt **feng shui** principles for its space in the belief that a positive arrangement of our environment promotes better health because qi is allowed to flow freely. An environment blocking the flow of qi, conversely, negatively impacts both physical and mental health.

The interior spaces of the Continuum Center were guided by the **feng shui** principles of the “art of placement,” believed to improve energy flow through the interior. In accordance with those beliefs, spaces were assigned as follows:

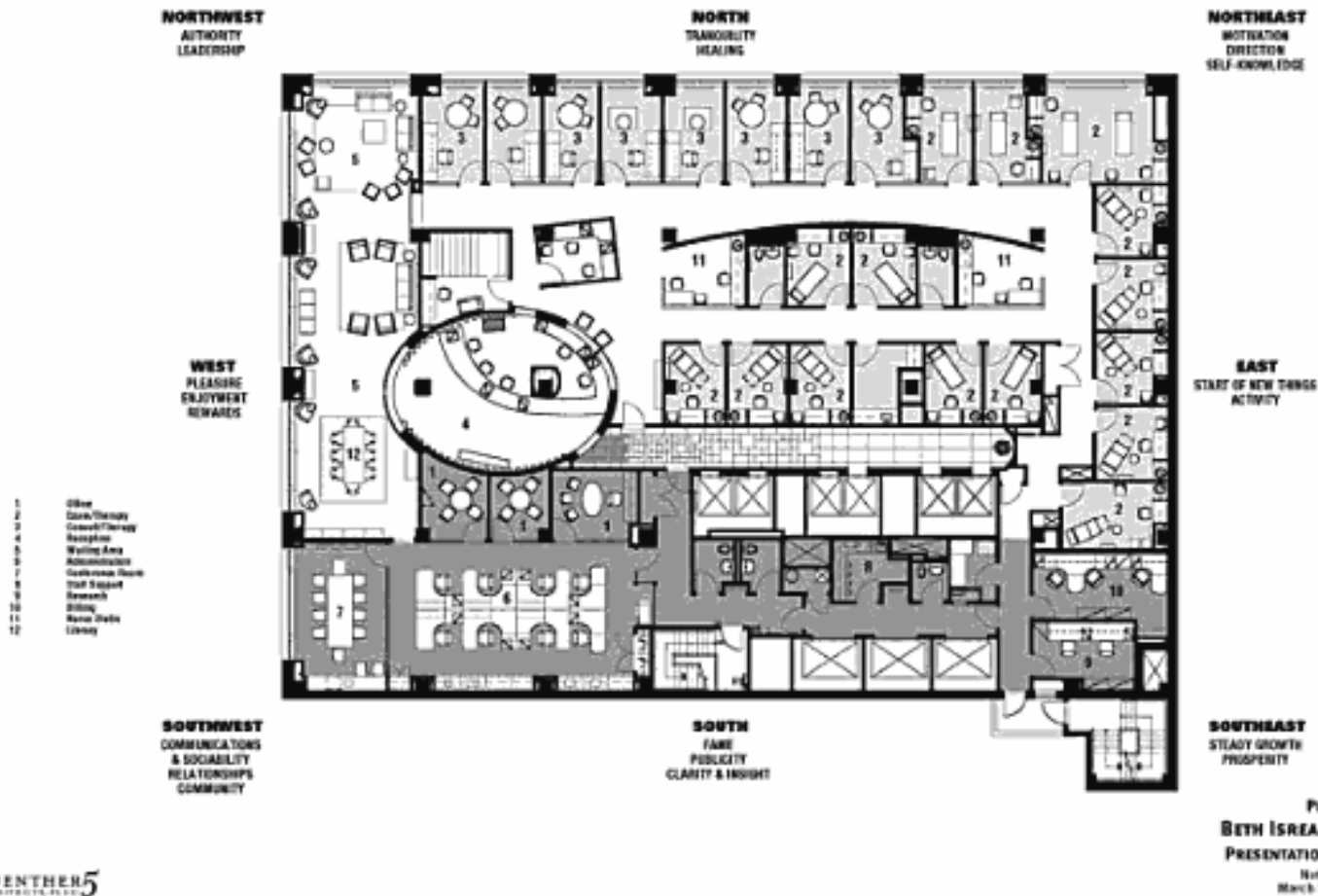
- The consultation, examination, and therapy rooms were placed to the north to promote patient healing and tranquility.
- Staff areas were located to the south to encourage harmonious internal communication.
- The waiting room was placed to the west to provide pleasure and connectivity.

- The OB/GYN rooms were situated to the east to represent new beginnings.

Rooms and areas placed southwest and southeast as well as northwest and northeast also symbolize and foster inner growth and outer potential.

It is especially significant that the building’s “prime real estate”—the northwest corner, on the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 28th Street—was designated public space for all to enjoy. In a conventional medical office, this space would have automatically been assigned as a doctor’s private office; here, however, giving the space to the patients serves as a symbolic gesture to empower patients, a theme essential to the center’s mission.

In another departure from traditional planning models, the waiting space is not visible from the elevator lobby. Instead, patients first travel through a complex spatial sequence intended to relax and calm.





Interior spaces were guided by the **feng shui** principles of the “art of placement,” believed to improve energy flow through the interior. The northwest corner, which typically would be considered the most prestigious location and assigned to doctors, was given instead to patient areas to symbolize a commitment to their well-being. © Peter Mauss/Esto



The waiting room serves as a multifunctional space for patients to talk with and learn from one another. It includes a large meeting table for group learning, a resource area, individual lounge seats, and Web-ready computer stations. © Peter Mauss/Esto

Living in Harmony with Nature

Feng shui principles impacted the interior design of the space in other ways as well. For example, the belief that living beings should live harmoniously with each other as well as with elements in nature influenced Guenther’s choice of the sustainable furnishings and finishes selected for the interiors, a task Robin Guenther said was not so easy five years ago when the project was being completed. “There was very limited availability of green materials—what a difference now,” she commented. “We sent back three shipments of acoustic insulation, for example, until the distributor understood that we were serious about a formaldehyde-free product.”

In the end, though, Guenther settled on the following sustainable design strategies:

- Material selections (flooring, paint, adhesives, and cabinet substrates) that eliminate the use of formaldehyde and VOCs. (Guenther said this project taught her that sustainable construction sites “smell” different, because they basically don’t have VOC odors. “The difference matters to construction workers,” she noted. “Painters

remarked about it. On one occasion, we came onto the site and noticed a VOC odor . . . which we could track right to an open quart container of adhesive.”)

- Minimal carpet is used; products specified included high levels of recycled content or were made from natural fibers. Major flooring materials are cork and linoleum, both natural, biodegradable products.
- Fabric selection focuses on the use of recycled and compostable materials. Materials were selected to be easily maintained with natural cleaning products in order to preserve a high level of indoor air quality.
- Durable, premium-quality, fast-curing, low-VOC paints and stains were used that meet or exceed all federal and state air quality regulations (including California’s) and contain no formaldehyde, ammonia, crystalline silica, or ethylene glycol.
- The medium-density fiberboard used for custom cabinetry is made from 100 percent recovered wood from old pallets, construction waste, and manufacturers’ outfall, which preserves natural resources and habitats. It is finished with a water-based clear finish that is very low in both odor and VOCs.

- The suspended ceiling's acoustic panels are composed of aspen wood fibers bonded with an inorganic cement, which is then formed under heat and pressure to create uniquely textured, extremely durable flat panels. All of the raw materials used are sustainable.
- Recycled glass tiles were used in restrooms with an appropriate adhesive and grout to make an environmentally friendly wall finish solution.
- Reclaimed antique heart pine is used in the yoga room and for the wood slat wall in the corridor. It is reclaimed from outmoded factories, textile mills, and warehouses as they are demolished. The wood finish is a natural oil product and is 100 percent biodegradable and made without harmful synthetic chemicals.



Wood reclaimed from abandoned buildings finds new life in the wood slat wall of this corridor. It is finished with a natural oil that is completely biodegradable and emits no VOCs. © Peter Mauss/Esto

- Furniture materials, upholstery, and other fabrics also further reflect the center's commitment to environmentally conscious choices. Additional design elements contributing to the space's "organic" composition include soft lighting and calming auditory input.

Because patients often come to the Continuum Center seeking Western and Eastern remedies for health issues that have environmental causes, Guenther explained, practitioners felt strongly that the environment of the office should "do no harm" to patients with allergies, asthma, and chemical sensitivity. And indeed it does not, offering patients instead a welcoming retreat, one that is designed—physically and philosophically—with their very best interests in mind.



Furniture and fabrics were chosen for their recycled content and use of biodegradable materials. © Peter Mauss/Esto