

Healing Spaces: Nature and the Spa

“There must be quite a few things a hot bath won’t cure, but I don’t know many of them”

~Sylvia Plath

For centuries, various cultures have celebrated the ritual of bathing. Hydrotherapy, the use of water in the treatment of aches, pains, and even disease was recognized as early as Greek and Roman times. In past centuries, bathing was identified as a means of relieving a wide range of conditions from poor blood circulation to rheumatism. The first spas in the Classical world were located at mineral hot springs where soldiers would soak their bodies in an attempt to rest and recover from battle. Soon after, large bathhouses were erected in city centers such as Rome for citizens to enjoy on a daily basis. These places served not only healing purposes but social ones as well. The act of public bathing had become an essential component of everyday life. While existing hydrotherapy baths still hold tremendous healing potential, an important question remains: can the architecture of a spa create spaces that are healing in and of themselves?

The central goal of this project will be to enhance the experience of the visitor by providing a therapeutic environment in the following ways: **a.)** Assist in the treatment of the physical body and **b.)** Support the spiritual needs of the visitor. These two factors create a sense of holistic healing and relaxation. Various healing principles, adopted mainly from healthcare design will support the goals mentioned above. These will include the integration of **a.)** Color Theory **b.)** Sustainable design **c.)** Organic architecture and **d.)** Connection to Nature. Erik Asmussen, a celebrated Swedish architect, utilized such principles in his design for the Vidar Clinic near Stockholm. “Asmussen believed that architecture should be nurturing, responsive, and alive...organically expressive forms, subtly luminous colors and biologically healthy, natural materials predominate in his work.” (Coates, 240). The notion of color theory was particularly essential in Asmussen’s design for the clinic at Stockholm. Coates goes on to describe that “The healing purposes of the Vidar Clinic, for example, are announced to the visitor by the soft pink glow of its humanly scaled and functionally articulated forms.” (252). Several colors remain instrumental in the design and are used not only for way finding but also to

invoke certain moods and settings that are suggestive of healing.

Sustainable design, in relation to the design of a nature spa, will take various forms. For example, on a larger scale, the building should respect the existing site and incorporate with the natural surroundings physically and ecologically. Several sustainability principles will be taken into account. A few key tenets are outlined in the *HOK Guidebook to Sustainable Design* including the preservation of natural site features, minimal impervious surfaces on the site, managing storm water, and maximizing positive effects of solar orientation and wind patterns (43). On a smaller scale, interior finishes should be constructed of natural, non-toxic materials especially for a facility intended to promote healing and rejuvenation. As research has shown, “Most things in the interior of a building contain chemicals that are harmful to people at some dosage...Many times when fires occur, in buildings, it is the chemicals released in the materials that kill people before the fire itself does.” (McLellan 68). In an effort to create a healthy environment, it will be important for the purposes of this project to choose materials that do not emit the harmful chemicals known as Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs). Materials should also be obtained from renewable sources and preferably from local manufacturers (in an effort to lessen the pollution produced during transport). Local materials will also help to create a strong connection between the buildings, the natural context, and its cultural context within Bend, Central Oregon and the Northwest.

In addition to the inclusion of various colors, Asmussen created organic forms in the Vidar Clinic that relate directly not only to the organic shapes found in nature but also to the curving forms of the human body. “In plan the walls of the clinic appear to be engaged in a dialogue between expansion and contraction, concavity and convexity, as if the building were breathing in and out...his buildings feel like living creatures that nurture and protect the life they contain” (248). This statement reflects the idea that physical forms can promote emotional responses and create a sense of healing. Asmussen’s principles for healthcare design will be greatly beneficial for the design process of a nature spa as well.

The fourth principle listed above, ‘Connection to Nature,’ will be especially prominent in the nature spa design. As in many traditional hot spring spa examples, immersion into the outdoors will aid in the theme of hydrotherapy and healing. While

this particular site does not contain natural hot springs, hot spring spa precedents will be utilized for inspiration. Healthcare design examples will be applicable as well due to the fact that many facilities have emphasized the importance of connecting to nature through the use of healing gardens for example. At the Central Oregon site chosen for the nature spa, there are numerous opportunities to connect to the arid high desert surroundings and the nearby Deschutes River.

Planetree, a non-profit organization, works with healthcare providers to develop healing environments. Founded in 1978, Planetree has worked to cultivate a connection between mind, body, and spirit in holistic healthcare centers. According to the Planetree headquarters website, “Healing gardens, fountains, fish tanks, and waterfalls are provided to connect patients, families and staff with the relaxing, invigorating, healing, and meditative aspects of nature.” (2). Healing gardens in particular are often linked with healthcare design as spaces for patients to reflect, relax, and enjoy the outdoors. Clare Cooper Marcus listed what she believed to be the seven essential components of a healing garden, “1. Visibility 2. Sense of security 3. Physiological comfort 4. Opportunities to make choices-seeking privacy or gathering for social support 5. Engagement with nature 6. Familiarity 7. Unambiguously positive design features” (36). The above principles will aid the mental and physical well being of visitors by being applied to specific indoor as well as outdoor spaces.

Four important spaces have the potential to be present as healing spaces for the mind and body. These include meditation rooms, relaxation rooms, massage rooms, and yoga rooms. The spaces will range from semi-private to private but all will have a focus toward the outdoors and the nearby Deschutes River. Revitalization of the body and mind will be an important facet of healing that will be utilized in conjunction with hydrotherapy. Meditation in particular has been recognized in the medical community as an effective form of mental and physical therapy. Bill Moyers, author of *Healing and the Mind*, interviewed Jon Kabat-Zinn Ph.D., founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center on the subject. Kabat-Zinn stated, “Meditation just has to do with paying attention in a particular way...the mind and body are actually different sides of the same coin” (116-17). Meditation practice is often combined with yoga exercise in order to restore the mind and body simultaneously.

Kabat-Zinn goes on to argue that, “A lot of people swear by yoga...It’s just another form of mindfulness, but you’re giving the body something to do, and it has the added benefit of reversing disuse atrophy and really toning the body. It’s a full-body, musculoskeletal and conditioning exercise.” (137). In this nature spa design, healing environments will facilitate mind and body activities in an effort to promote overall wellness.

An essential relaxation space that will be featured in the design is a tea pavilion. This asset will provide a restful area for spa goers before or after treatment. The consumption of tea, an essential practice in many cultures, can relax the mind and body while providing the nutrients of steeped dried leaves and flower buds. According to scientific research, tea drinking has been linked to the prevention of heart disease and some types of cancer, lower cholesterol, skin protection, and the strengthening of teeth and bones (Ellis 1). While tea drinking has been practiced for centuries, it has only recently been regarded as a preventative medicine of sorts.

Other relaxation spaces include indoor and outdoor hearths where guests can enjoy comfortable seating while warming up by the fire, engaging in quiet conversation, and experiencing a pleasant, home-like atmosphere. The notion of the hearth has been a central design asset in residential design for centuries. By providing warmth to the living spaces and a place to cook meals, these fireplaces brought family and friends together. A residential feel will be fundamental in the nature spa design in order to enhance the comfort of daytime and especially overnight guests.

The most essential relaxation spaces will be the hydrotherapy spas themselves. Surrounding natural plantings will provide shelter and privacy for spa guests. While the character of these pools will encourage private reflection and contemplation, they will also serve as semi-public spaces that facilitate quiet socializing. As the central element of the nature spa resort, the hydrotherapy spas will be surrounded by and easily accessible from all resort buildings.

As described above, healing spaces can be achieved by various methods to enhance and promote health and well being in connection with not only healthcare facilities but a hydrotherapy spa resort as well. By providing holistic methods for healing of the mind and body, a nature spa will provide tourists and locals alike with a chance to enjoy Central Oregon’s scenery while maintaining and enhancing overall health.

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