There was a time in healthcare when bricks and mortar meant just that—a utilitarian building. Hospitals and health facilities provided a place for delivering health services. Unless they were particularly unusual, luxurious, or unattractive, the physical plant was seldom noticed by patients or even employees of the healthcare organization. Patients, after all, were more concerned with getting the care they needed and were often willing to overlook facility defects they wouldn't have accepted in some other setting. The buildings weren't expected to contribute to function or process and were considered little more than passive "props."

That was before healthcare organizations discovered the consumer and before contemporary health professionals discovered what every shaman has known for centuries: The environment plays a major role in the therapeutic process. During the '80s, as consumers began to exert their influence on the healthcare system, progressive health professionals realized that a new set of "hot buttons" was driving consumer behavior and one of these was the set of amenities associated with a healthcare setting. Led by the baby boom cohort, consumers began to demand tasteful, well-appointed waiting rooms and other public areas. It wasn't long before hospitals were vying to offer consumers more attractive facilities than their competitors.

At the same time, the holistic health movement was gaining momentum and, not surprisingly, the proponents of holistic healthcare began to promote the notion of the "therapeutic environment." Drawing on environmental perspectives from outside of healthcare, progressive health professionals began emphasizing the role the physical environment could play in the healing process. A growing body of research emerged to indicate the role of color, texture, light, and sound in the healing process. Facilities-development firms began to adopt concepts from the hotel industry and other fields to create an integrated, holistic environment that, at a minimum, established a pleasant milieu and, at best, contributed materially to the therapeutic process.

Healthcare marketers were perhaps slower than they should have been in picking up on the marketing potential of facilities design. Market research, after all, revealed the concerns and preferences of consumers when it came to their healthcare environments. The more perceptive marketers quickly recognized an opportunity for making their institutions stand out in an environment where hospitals were seen as interchangeable. Admittedly, most of the early marketing touted the upscale character of facilities and their hotel-like amenities. As consumers began expressing a preference for a more therapeutic environment, marketers began to capitalize on the design aspects of their facilities, including the healing features of the environment.

Up until now, the marketing potential of health facilities has been largely ignored. Marketing Health Services chose to take this opportunity to explore the relationship between a facilities design and the ammo that the current design movement can offer to marketers. A panel of experts was brought together to represent various perspectives. The following interview offers some background on this relatively new area of health facilities marketing and assesses the status of progressive facilities design today.

MHS identified three panelists to talk about facilities design and healing environments as a marketing tool. Each of the panelists represents a different perspective and offers useful insights into the topic. Diane Bush represents perhaps the broadest perspective, while panelists Steve Robbins and Susan Mazer are more focused in their observations.
MHS: How would you describe from your particular vantage point the evolution of the facilities-design movement and, particularly, the therapeutic environment concept in healthcare? What factors have contributed to its emergence as a force in the field?

DB: The notion of a therapeutic environment is still in the developmental stage in healthcare. I became involved in this initiative several years ago because of what I saw in hospitals. I began looking into the issue of design as therapy and found that healthcare lagged behind other industries in its consideration of the effects of environment on humans. This concept had been factored into the design of birthing centers in the ’80s, but that was about as far as it went. By the mid-’90s, I witnessed a surprising openness on this issue and a readiness to explore it on the part of health professionals. Many people felt there was something wrong with their environment, and, rather than contributing to healing, the setting was detrimental to one’s health. And this was not just to the health of patients, but to employees as well. A few notable individuals began campaigning for more humane environments, and the movement was off and running.

Despite its recent application in U.S. healthcare, there’s really nothing that new about therapeutic design. Successful healers throughout history have known the social and physical environment was critical to the healing process. Indeed, that’s about all they had to work with. The ancients knew about the notion of human scale and the relationship between people and their environment. We now have scientific evidence on the impact of color and patterns and know that the replication of the DNA configuration in physical space has a healing property. This allows the interface of the human system (the body) with the organizational system.

SM: In the late-’80s the first groups began talking about the role that sound played in a therapeutic environment. These were fairly cutting-edge discussions in healthcare, although other industries had long been sensitive to the importance of sound in the environment. (In fact, Florence Nightingale in her first nursing textbook admonished nurses to “alter the environment to be therapeutic.”) About this time the healthcare industry was being set on its head by increasing competition, an emphasis on outcomes, and the need to reduce costs. Health professionals began to recognize the negative impact that environment could have on these factors and, by the ’90s, had become more open to discussions of therapeutic design. Today, this notion of a therapeutic environment (including the sound environment) is pretty well-accepted (if not always acted upon), and accrediting agencies are even supporting standards for such environments.
The challenge has been to design an environment that addresses these needs and preferences. In the fitness center, they're looking for value and results. At the same time, baby boomers have begun demanding child-relevant design for their children. SR: There's no question that the design trends in fitness centers are being driven by the baby boomers—all of healthcare is really. Early on, baby boomers were seeking fitness options for their parents who had had heart surgery or a stroke. And they wanted features for their parents that they themselves would want. Now it's the baby boomers themselves and their families who are utilizing health services and looking for fitness facilities. But it's not just about healthcare. For this cohort of consumers it's about maximizing one's life. This is an active, fun-loving generation used to numerous creature comforts. At the same time, they're looking for value and results. The challenge has been to design an environment that addresses these needs and preferences. In the fitness center business, this might be pictured as "adult entertainment" with an underlying health benefit.

SM: The baby boomers probably haven't yet directly contributed to the movement toward more of a healing environment. The movement represents more of an anticipatory move on the part of healthcare organizations. They know boomers are going to have high expectations with regard to their healthcare experience and they're not going to cling to traditional ways of doing anything. Now, with access to the Internet, prospective patients are able to check out the facility's environment beforehand online. Many of the design changes are in anticipation of boomer expectations.

How has this movement been influenced by the trend toward hotel-type facilities and concierge-like services on the part of hospitals and health systems?

SR: While design trends in fitness facilities probably developed independently of the hotel-style hospital design trend, the same thought processes were probably involved. As health professionals began to realize that healthcare is a game of demographics, they asked themselves: What does the population we desire to serve want? Baby boomers in particular wanted something different from previous generations. From a bottom-line perspective, it was obvious that "business as usual" wasn't going to cut it with the new generation of patients, and marketers began to realize that a means of differentiation was necessary in the face of increased competition for the hearts and minds (and dollars) of healthcare consumers. Design features came to be seen as a factor in achieving both business and marketing objectives.

SM: The movement toward more hotel-like facilities didn't appear to have played a role in the movement toward more therapeutic environments from my perspective. The motivations are radically different for the two movements. Simply replicating the look and feel of a hotel is a far cry from creating an integrated sound environment. Environmental planning needs to be embedded in the organization, not just skin deep as with cosmetic improvements. Besides, the sound environment involves everyone and affects everyone, not just patients. The sounds that stick in patients' minds can be positive or negative and, if they are memories of staff grouding or talking about other patients, they're likely to be negative.

DB: The trend toward hotel-type facilities has probably paralleled this development rather than been a driver of it. The big difference is that hotel design is primarily cosmetic and geared to be visually appealing in public areas, but does not go much beyond that. There is a big difference between a well-appointed facility and a facility that has been designed top to bottom to create a therapeutic environment. The same is true of the concierge-type services that have been put into place. Customer service is certainly a component of a therapeutic environment, but smiling faces and valet parking do not a therapeutic environment make. Therapeutic design is deeper and broader than that and must be built

A CLOSER LOOK:
Susan Mazer

Susan Mazer, a musician and the president of Healing Healthcare Systems, holds an M.A. degree from Stanford University. She was first exposed to healthcare in the early '80s when health professionals began asking her for input on musical therapy for their nursing curricula. While not a music therapist, Mazer could see the applications and the relevance of sound—not just music—for any healthcare environment. Realizing that any healing environment begins with the sound environment, she established a consulting firm to provide support to hospitals and clinics that want to consider the importance of sound in environmental design. She may be reached at hhs@healinghealth.com.
into all form and function in the facility. In effect, what is required is an organization-wide therapeutic mindset that's supported by environmental design.

In your experience, what are today's healthcare consumers looking for in a facility and how has this influenced the marketing arena?

SR: The wellness center environment epitomizes the movement toward consumer-driven healthcare. With traditional health facilities, the services were what counted, not the environment or the amenities. "Saving lives" required a utilitarian environment and any "fluff" in the environment was considered extraneous. This is still true today for inpatient facilities, where only the sickest patients are admitted. They just want to get well and really don't care what color the halls are. Even here, however, hospitals have made concessions to consumer needs. The patients might not care about their surroundings, but their families sure do. Hence, the movement toward hotel-like settings and concierge services.

Fitness and wellness center users represent the new category of health-care consumer. Although some clients of these centers are there on "doctor's orders" for cardiac rehab or some other medical regimen, most consumers who join health and fitness centers are there of their own volition. That is, they made a conscious choice to join a fitness center and to join a particular one. Thus, the same factors that come into play in the selection of other brands of consumer goods come into play in the selection of a fitness center.

Are there certain healthcare environments (or certain types of organizations) where attention to design and environment are more important than in others? Further, are there categories of health professionals that still resist this movement?

DB: I've worked in a range of health-care settings, including those that had little to do with patient care. These include hospitals, clinics, physician office buildings, HMOs, and public health departments. Even if no patients are present, the employees need a supportive environment. With regard to stumbling blocks, there are still hospital traditionalists who believe hospitals should be utilitarian and that "fancy" design is unnecessary, expensive, and distracting. Fortunately, this population is dwindling as healthcare organizations take more of a business-like approach to the provision of services. Nevertheless, the constant turnover in hospital administrators makes it difficult to establish the long-term commitment necessary for the creation of a therapeutic environment. There's also resistance from architects, interior designers, and others who have a vested interest in perpetuating existing design approaches.

SM: Although few healthcare administrators today would say outright they don't think the environment is important, it's hard to push the concept with a health professional who's not at the appropriate state of readiness. In fact, we only offer consulting services to an organization that has come to us. Besides, we never know who within the organization is going to be the champion for a therapeutic environment—the nursing staff, administration, medical staff, and even marketing (although not likely to be the first to contact us).

The creation of a positive sound environment within a therapeutic setting involves a radical new mindset on the part of health professionals. This isn't something that can be imposed very easily on an existing environment, so it's important to consider sound issues at the initiation of any project. And it can't be a gimmick. The incorporation of an appropriate sound environment involves a long-term commitment to a therapeutic milieu.

In marketing progressive facility design to health professionals and/or the healthcare consumer, what are the primary selling points?

DB: In terms of marketing the concept to reluctant hospital administrators, there are a lot of angles that can be pursued. It's easy to present this as an idea whose time has come. It's appealing to staff, patients, and consumers, hitting the entire range of current consumer hot buttons. It's great PR in the community and attracts funding

“There’s no question that the design trends in fitness centers are being driven by the baby boomers—all of healthcare is really.” —Stephen Robbins
Sales Representative, Medical Equipment

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from community foundations and the hospital's constituencies. And a real selling point to hospital administrators is that therapeutically supportive design can actually be less expensive than traditional design.

SM: There's ample material for use in marketing the concept of a therapeutic sound environment to hospital administrators and healthcare consumers. One need only point out the detrimental aspects of the typical hospital environment—unpleasant and disruptive noises, gossip by the staff, biomedical equipment sounds, not to mention the often unattractive physical environment. Healthcare facilities are beginning to realize they are selling an experience and that the environment is a big part of that experience. The environment contributes to patient satisfaction and employee satisfaction and, in this regard, serves as a marketing tool for the human resources staff.

"Healthcare facilities are beginning to realize they are selling an experience." —Susan Mazer

SR: In terms of "selling" innovative fitness center design to health systems, there are few objectives of the organization that it doesn't relate to. Look at the mission statement of most healthcare organizations and you'll find something about improving the health of the community. Appropriately designed form and function contribute to the effectiveness of the services provided, better outcomes, higher patient satisfaction, and a progressive image for the organization. A well-designed fitness center represents an attractive outlet for the hospital's services and attracts a clientele that may never be hospitalized. It provides the basis for a comprehensive outpatient program and contributes to continuity of care.

Finally, how can design issues be related to the business goals and/or marketing objectives of healthcare organizations?

DB: While the overall therapeutic benefits of a healing environment may seem a little touchy-feely to, say, a hospital CFO, a strong business case can be made for well-planned space design that reduces falls, decreases liability, reduces employee turnover, and increases patient satisfaction. Better design has been found to streamline patient flow and actually increase the time available to spend with patients.

SM: From a marketing perspective, the sound environment provides a basis for differentiation. With increased competition among what may be, for all practical purposes, comparable institutions, hospitals began looking for a means to set themselves apart. Creating a supportive sound environment as part of an overall healing environment is one way to do this. Such institutions can argue that they have moved beyond basic expectations to a level of excellence relative to their competitors.

SR: The next phase of fitness center design will incorporate all of the features that consumers have come to appreciate and that contribute to a healing environment—light, color, sound, texture—with high-tech capabilities. The pitch will be that the client can promote his health in a pleasant, therapeutic environment while being wired into his physician's office for real-time monitoring of vital signs. Plus, good design doesn't have to cost more and, properly executed, should contribute to the hospital's bottom line. One-stop fitness and wellness shopping in an environment that's inspiring and therapeutic is an easy sell with today's healthcare consumer. The design says we have differentiated ourselves from other providers by providing the environment you want. These enhancements will not only serve to meet the organization's goals, but will contribute to the bottom line.