

The impact of architecture, design on healing

Sitting across from Army Sgt. Daniel Tsutsumi, I see his desperation. That look of coping with the reality; paralyzed from the neck down, barely recalling how that happened. “Where were you stationed?” I asked.

“I did two tours in Iraq,” he explained.

“What is your recall of that place?” I inquired.

“Intensely barren and hot,” he shared.

And then, the key question, “What is your favorite place?”

“My parents’ home,” he replied. “The den has large windows with lots of trees in the yard and a worn comfortable leather sofa where I hung out with my friends.” And then, a plea: “I just want to be normal again. Have a place where I can have my friends over and feel normal.”

This delicate process of procuring information was the first step toward recovery for Sgt. Tsutsumi. A hot, arid environment would be a trigger, a major block to healing. On the other hand, an environment that evoked those pleasant memories would be comforting and allow both physical and mental healing to take place.

Normal was the operative word – a key component for every wounded warrior.

The beginning. Impassioned by the sacrifice of our young veterans, I decided after 9/11 to help, to give back to those who fought for freedom by using what I loved most, architecture and interior design, to their benefit. Thus was born Designing for Veterans, dedicated to providing custom environments that not only are accessible and functional,



Carol Way Cisco
Senior Interior
Designer,
Rowland+
Broughton
Architecture/Urban
Design/Interior
Design, Aspen

but aid in the recovery.

Understanding that the built environment does impact a person’s ability to heal was an important truth. For example, it has been statistically proven in health care that a red room raises the patient’s blood pressure. The result can be a false reading. Take the patient out of the red room and his blood pressure drops to normal.

With over 25 years of professional design experience, coupled with training in mental health, I embarked on a research program partially funded with a grant from the American Society of Interior Designers Foundation – the Irene Winfred Eno Grant. I began testing her hypotheses using the evidence-based design process. Over time, my team and I established a set of therapeutic design elements key to a veteran’s recovery and proved that the built environment does have an impact on recovery.

Sensory perception is one of those key elements. A sense of quality in the environment translates into a sense of value and worth. Designs that create a sense of normalcy are impacting. In other words, the entire premise of the work we do is designing an environment that will not be a constant reminder a disability.

It is a therapeutic approach. Veterans sense much more of the environ-



To avoid a constant reminder of disability, the queen-size “hospital” bed could not look like one.

ment than just sight, sound, touch and smell. We must recognize and acknowledge that a veteran’s sensory perceptions have been dramatically increased due to service in the military and especially having combat experience. For them, or anyone who has had a traumatic experience, there is a heightened perceptual sensitivity to their environment.

Another element is mood lines. Architecture and interiors specifically impact the mood of an individual. Tall columns and drapes are strong vertical lines that provide a sense of stability and security. Jagged flame stitch wallpaper can make a person irritated and upset.

Nature itself is the most therapeutic aspect of our work. Large windows with nature in view can increase recovery rates dramatically;

even one small green bush outside a veteran’s window has proven to have impact statistically.

A case study by design. Army Sgt. Daniel Tsutsumi’s project was a case study that established many of the therapeutic design elements used by Designing for Veterans today. A high-end residential project, it approached design from a therapeutic perspective in unique ways that one would never realize from just looking at the interior.

With limited space, due to setbacks and zoning restrictions, a 900-square-foot studio addition was designed to both support and challenge the veteran during his rehabilitation process. From a psychological perspective, it needed to look normal

Please see Next Page

Health Care & Senior Housing Spotlight

Continued from Previous Page

and build a sense of worth and value, rather than be a constant reminder of his disability.

Planned with assistive devices and technologies to help develop his minor motor skills, the tablet-based system allowed him to control the doors, shades, lights, TV and thermostat from his iPad. A queen-size “hospital” bed could not look like one, nor could the bath emphasize his disability, while still being Americans with Disabilities Act compliant. Grab bars looked like towel bars, and a bath and studio were designed to accommodate each phase of recovery – wheelchair to walker to walking.

A therapy massage showering system was required to activate nerve endings. Mood lines were used to create visual stability, such as the vertical paneling and strong flat lines in the bath, an area most vulnerable

to falling. Sensory elements were incorporated through aromatic cedar from reclaimed barn wood. A sliding barn door was precisely weighted for use in occupational therapy and a “handicap ramp” that did not look like one was installed.

But most needed were privacy and ownership: An environment that offered ownership of space allowing the veteran control of his life. A place where he could entertain and find solitude away from others when needed. A virtual cabin in the woods.

Designing for Veterans has received several awards from ASID and International Interior Design Association and has been published in numerous publications, including Contract magazine and ASID ICON, and featured on the local CBS television stations in Illinois.

For more about Sgt. Tsutsumi and Designing for Veterans visit <http://www.designingforveterans.org/>▲



To help develop minor motor skills, the tablet-based system provides control of the doors, shades, lights, TV and thermostat.



Grab bars look like towel bars, and the bath was designed to accommodate each phase of recovery – wheelchair to walker to walking.