

From the Outside In

by lyn falk

Creating a spa environment that nourishes you, your employees and your customers on psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual levels involves more than just color and lighting. Although these are two of the most important design elements, it's about achieving synergy with multiple principles and components, as well as stimulating—without overwhelming—the five senses.

Clients come to a spa to escape the stresses of life, to calm chaotic energy and to create internal balance. They arrive in search of a grounded and healed state, and they're looking for an experience that is quiet, gentle and safe. When establishing an eco-friendly spa, work from the outside in, focusing on every detail a client will encounter during the visit.

BASIC ELEMENTS

Each aspect of the space should contribute to the overall mood. When balanced together, these elements will produce an inviting and soothing environment. As you enter into the design process, keep the following considerations in mind.

Air. The air in the space should be fresh and circulated. An aroma of natural essential oils also can be introduced. Avoid synthetic air fresheners and toxic cleaning materials whose odors take hours to dissipate.

Artwork. Keep artwork simple, natural and restful. Try to find handmade pieces from local artisans in lieu of mass-produced machine-made items.

Ceiling height. The ceiling of your spa can create an intimate feeling. Heights in the corridors and lounges can be as high as 10 feet,

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while treatment rooms should be 8–9 feet. Decorate ceilings with 2-foot square acoustical panels or drywall with a beautiful faux finish.

Color choice. The colors should be inviting, not loud and shocking—soft hues and medium to deep values are best.

Floors. Eco-friendly floors include salvaged wood or wood from sustainably managed forests, linoleum, cork and natural carpets. If a nylon carpet is preferred, opt for one with recycled fibers. For treatment areas and changing lounges, consider linoleum or ceramic tile floors—both are easy to clean.

Furniture. Choose furniture that is made from natural materials and assembled with nontoxic adhesives and finishes. Seating pieces can be made with natural latex rubber cushions; natural upholstery, such as wool, hemp, silk or cotton; and solid wood or recycled steel components. If you are concerned about cleaning and potential stains, select recycled polyester seat cushions. There are many colors and patterns available now in commercial-grade upholstery.



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Editor's note: This article is based on a presentation given by the author at Face & Body 2005. Part I of this topic appeared in the October 2005 issue and featured design elements, principles and tools for creating an eco-friendly spa.



Furniture

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Unfortunately, sustainable furniture still is fairly expensive because large manufacturers have yet to make eco-minded changes to their product lines. However, a few independent companies are making names for themselves. Something else to keep in mind when buying furnishings and decorative accessories for your spa is the origin of the product. An item that is made locally certainly is more energy efficient than one that is transported from a foreign country.

Lighting. Brightness levels should be soft, yet provide enough illumination for the pupils to avoid dilation in darker environments. For external lighting, a pleasant outdoor view always is appreciated, as long as the sun's hot rays are screened out during the day. The most favorable light comes from the east and is full of vibrant energy. Western light exudes a more calming influence and is warmer and more subdued. Use window treatments to filter light during different times of the day.

When it comes to artificial light, bring in soft incandescent floor and table lamps to create subtle ambiance. Recessed metal halides or ceiling fluorescents give off brighter illumination on cloudy days or nights, or when a visual examination of a client's skin is necessary. Even though fluorescents are energy efficient, they are not healthy light sources because they often cause headaches, fatigue and stress. Be conservative with their use, and make sure they are full-spectrum.

Linens. Go with organic cotton in soft hues when choosing textiles that will touch clients' skin. When washing or drying linens, do not use laundry products that contain added synthetic perfumes.

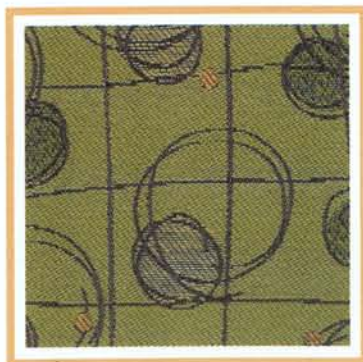
Noises. Remove unsettling noises, and introduce soothing environmental sounds or soft music with gentle, rhythmic beats.

Textiles. Soft textures, such as carpet, upholstered seating, pillows and fabric window treatments, will absorb unavoidable noise that can occur on a daily basis.

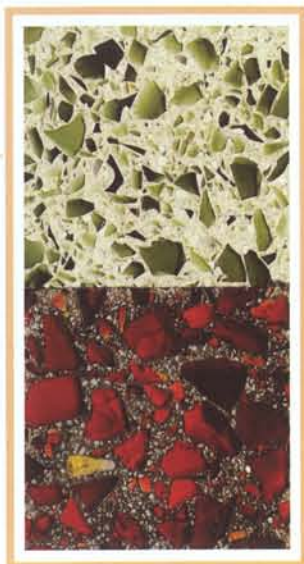
Wall finishes. Eco-friendly wall finishes include nontoxic paint, all-natural textured plasters and wallcoverings made from paper, grass, reed, silk or cotton. If you opt for wallcoverings at your spa, make sure that the installer uses a water-based, low-volatile organic compound (VOC) adhesive. Walls also should be well insulated to filter outside noise, as well as to ensure maximum privacy.

Textiles

Soft textures will absorb unavoidable noise that can occur every day.



Wet rooms *Incorporate glass and concrete elements.*



For rooms filled with eastern light, you can use any color palette. However, rooms that receive western light should incorporate cool green, blue or purple tones to offset the warmth and heaviness. Again, use soft hues with deeper values, and avoid colors that over-reflect or create visual vibrancy.

Wet rooms. For treatment areas designated for water services, recycled glass tiles are a beautiful wall alternative that is available in a variety of gorgeous styles, colors and sizes.

THE TRANSITION ZONE

Upon entering this area, clients carry with them the energy of the outside world, along with their own emotional and physical baggage. This energy can be either frenetic or stagnant. The first few minutes spent in the space should be the beginning of the transformation to a healthy state.

This critical area of connection is the zone of transition, which should communicate to the mind, body and spirit on subliminal and overt levels that it is time to settle in and prepare for change. If the client is frantic, the space needs to help her slow down; her voice should drop to a quieter tone, her feet should begin to walk at a slower pace, and her breathing should become deeper and more deliberate.

A client who is burdened with sickness or stagnant energy needs to feel safe and nurtured, so that she can let down her personal guards and allow the healing process to begin. Some clients who are overwhelmed with emotional or physical illness are moved to tears simply by the act of entering a safe, nurturing transition zone.

The interior of a spa business is a powerful communicator, and a well-designed space begins its healing work immediately. Achieving this critical effect involves a change in lighting and color, flooring, ceiling height and acoustics. Other important elements include traffic flow, focal points, sounds and smells.

ENTRANCE AND CHECK-IN

The entrance area should communicate a gentle shift from the outside world into the womb of the spa. All of the senses should adjust quickly and easily to the space. Checking in should

be a simple process. A nicely designed counter should be visible upon entering. Background music helps to mute personal conversations and entertain waiting clients.

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WAITING LOUNGE

After the client checks in, guide her to a waiting lounge to help her prepare psychologically and physically for the treatment. Filling the room with comfortable furniture, healthy plants and floral arrangements, and inspirational artwork sets a relaxing mood. An area with informative reading material and healthy beverages also goes a long way toward building client satisfaction and loyalty. Again, soft music or the sound of bubbling water contributes to the overall environment.

THE SPA

As the client leaves the waiting lounge and enters the tranquil space of the spa, another transition takes place. In preparation, she changes clothes and uses the restroom before being led into the treatment room. Both of these areas need to be private, professional, clean and quiet, without a clinical feel. Avoid the standard 2 x 4-foot dropped acoustic ceiling panels, vinyl composition floor tile, fluorescent lights and white walls.

The spa area should provide a venue for interaction between the service provider and the client. The spa professional controls the type and volume of music, light levels and room temperature in each treatment room. These ambient controls greatly affect the experience for both parties. They may be a bit expensive to install up front, but the payback quickly will become evident through improved service and client satisfaction.

When rent is high, space becomes extremely valuable. Be careful not to design small work spaces that create claustrophobic environments for both your clients and team members. There should be enough room for your equipment and a chair for the client, as well as sufficient space for two people to move comfortably. Accoutrements such as a wall-mounted mirror and robe hooks also will prove useful.

POST-TREATMENT ROOM

After the completion of certain treatments, clients may be so moved by the experience that emotional responses, psychological reactions and physical symptoms may surface. In such cases, the person should be guided to another private space in which she can compose herself before leaving the treatment area. This room should be similar in design to the waiting lounge, but smaller and completely private. Furnish the space with a table and two chairs, so that the technician can sit with the client, if requested. This can be a critical period of transition for the client—a time to become grounded before reentering the real world. Suggested accessories

for this room include a mirror, glasses and a pitcher of water, a box of tissues, and a pen and paper for journaling.

FINDING THE WAY

After a treatment, a client may or may not be led back to the dressing room. Be sure to create well-designed signage and identifiable design elements, such as water features, illuminated artwork and differently colored or textured walls, to help clients find their way throughout the space.

CREATE AMBIANCE

Remember to balance the basic design elements—wind, water, fire and earth—in your spa. Keep air, or wind, moving with

proper ventilation. Bring in the water element with a fountain or aquarium. Address fire by accenting the space with candles or a gas fireplace. Make sure to keep a fire extinguisher on hand. Earth elements can include natural finishes and furnishings, along with live plants and flowers. Keep in mind, however, that many fresh-cut flowers are sprayed with pesticides that can produce allergies in some people. It is best to opt for organically grown and prepared bouquets.

These design suggestions can help you create a spa that will keep clients coming back again and again. The word will spread quickly that your facility offers an experience that truly affects and enhances the mind, body and spirit. ✧