

ABSTRACT:

Designing for Well-being in Domestic Violence Shelters

As the backdrop to the human drama they enclose, physical environments play either a supportive or unsupportive role. Their role can never be neutral. Architects and interior designers develop evidence-based design guidelines to create supportive environments for the stakeholders of their projects. Research studies revealing correlations between design elements and staff and patient outcomes, for example, led not only to well-established design guidelines, but to a whole design industry known as health care design. Today we have a foundation of literature on the subject that over the last decade has expanded to include other care facilities, e.g. children's hospitals and dementia care units requiring both security as well as comfort. In spite of a similar combination of service needs requiring external security yet comfort within, the design of domestic violence (DV) shelters, by contrast, still remains nearly absent in literature. This paper proposes that, although the sources of potential distress and danger are different, individuals hospitalized for medical treatment and DV shelter residents share similar experiences of fear and anxiety associated with vulnerability, unknown outcomes, social isolation, and separation from their typical environment. Given the lack of resources available for DV shelter design, this paper proposes that existing healthcare design guidelines may inform design of DV shelters with new strategies aimed at improving residents' psychological well-being. The result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between a professor of social work and a professor of architecture, this paper attempts to blend the theoretical and practical approaches of both fields, and assert that the built physical environment is an un-neutral element with potential to hinder or facilitate DV survivor well-being. Proposing the adoption of specific design strategies that increase sense of control, social support, and reduce environmental stressors, this paper provides a blueprint for interdisciplinary collaboration to enrich DV shelter experiences.