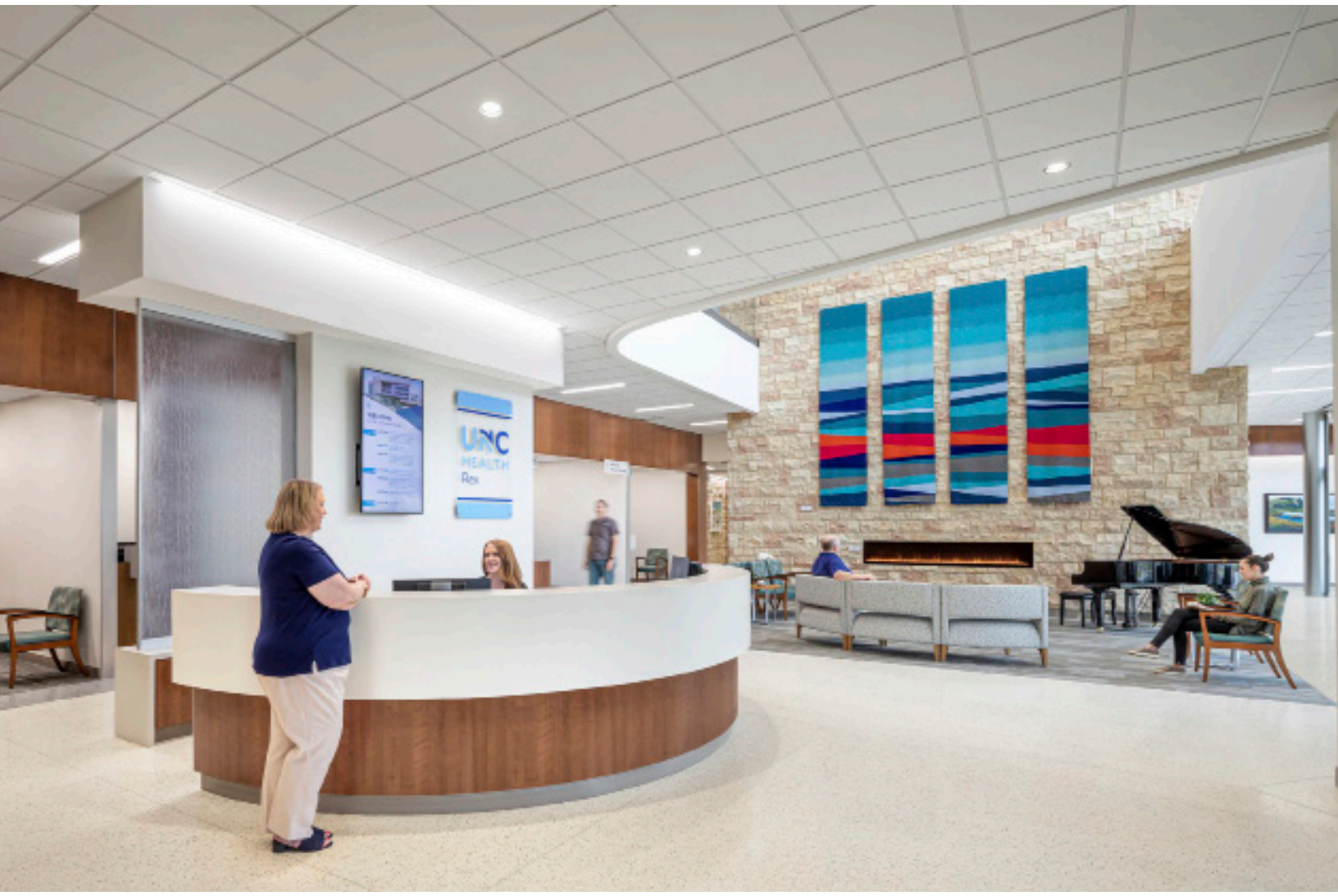
Mapping through Empathy

Reaching deeper levels of understanding into the human experience on healthcare projects



BSA

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There is a simple truth to patients' relationship with healthcare: Most times, patients and families do not want to be at a healthcare facility. First impressions are just the start of the journey. Intuitive clarity is of central importance.

From the moment patients and families enter a facility, their experience of navigating the site and then the various encounters within the facility must be efficient, seamless and humane. If they are overwhelmed and confused about where to go, who to speak with and technology that is difficult to use, their anxiety is only heightened. To avoid this problem, think of touchpoints in a journey. By aligning the empathy map to the touchpoints, outcomes can start to reveal themselves.

Empathy mapping in action

One example project, a 145,000-gross-square-foot standalone cancer center in Raleigh, North Carolina, exemplifies the patient-friendly focus. The team engaged in a "mapping with empathy" approach by virtually walking different user personas through the proposed design for the new cancer center.

The team initially diagrammed the flows for each patient type identifying the key steps in the patient's experience as 21 different patient flow experiences were initially identified. Many of these flows would be experienced by the same patient during different types of visits to the same facility. The goal of maintaining personalized care, yet simplifying and somewhat standardizing the patient experience became a driver in the design of the new facility. This goal aimed to optimize ease of use for the patient.

The team then used a computer simulated model and choreographed the patient experience including wait times and staff handoffs (such as from registration to a patient navigator to care team).

The simulation showed that using a basic centralized registration approach for all patients and patient types in such a large facility could potentially cause bottlenecks up front that would negatively impact the patient experience. In order to limit the risk of backups, yet still maintain consistency to the centralized registration experience, the team implemented several solutions:

1) Right-size the number of registration bays in order to minimize wait times during peak registration times of day,

2) Identify opportunities for online (pre-registration) or assisted kiosk registration for returning patients, and

3) Determine that specific patient populations can by-pass daily registration and go directly to treatment areas (such as radiation oncology patients who visit daily during intense treatment periods).

The team also analyzed patient volumes for near-term and long-term growth, as well as made future predictions by modeling various scenarios to predict when the planned building might reach maximum utilization.

Empathy as key planning tool

Overall, the project team viewed empathy as important as data-driven metrics and the need for a viable proforma, leading to project success from both a quantitative and qualitative approach.

Another example project has revitalized a dilapidated shopping mall in Columbus, Indiana, a city that has undergone an architectural renaissance over the past 50 years, creating a heightened expectation of the architectural experience among its residents.

One of the project team's primary focuses has been how to choreograph the experience and update the optics and ambiance so visitors do not realize that they are in what was formerly a shopping mall. The team used an interactive modeling process and solicited feedback from a variety of stakeholders about what does and doesn't work in the space.

One of the key decisions was to modify the clinical model to an on stage/off stage approach with similar functions consolidated to share resources—a significant change for the system, which had previously consisted of small, individual practices scattered all over Columbus. Consolidating multiple services in one place makes it easier for patients to navigate and engage in the care they are receiving.

Power of engagement

The power of engagement cannot be overstated. Take the optimal patient room at UPMC East, a 156-bed hospital in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, which reduced the patient room space by 80 square feet. While it seems a smaller space experience would lower patient satisfaction, studies showed it in fact increased by offering rooms with larger windows, abundant daylight and more stimulating views, simply by rethinking space.

By optimizing what a site has to offer — whether views of surrounding landscape or visual access to active spaces within — design teams can create connections on different levels. From those connections, people develop a relationship with the environment and the community of other patients, families and providers, finding inspiration in their movement.

This feeling of connectivity and belonging is enhanced by the selection of materials, which provide a textured and context sensitive aesthetic to connect occupants to their environment and a sense of something greater.

Connecting to nature

Nature took center stage at WakeMed North, a 13-acre site in Raleigh, North Carolina. What started as a 100,000-square-foot medical office building evolved to add a freestanding emergency department and ultimately became a 60-bed hospital. Throughout this two-decade-long progression from outpatient to inpatient, a central organizing feature was a four-court garden with a densely planted grove of honey locust trees interspersed with brick pavers.

Visitors traveled through this natural “filter” when entering the building from the parking lot. As the building expanded, the garden remained a focal point, with waiting areas extending into the garden space, spotlighting views of the grove. The goal was to reduce stress by connecting patients and their loved ones with calming natural elements.

As the site expanded into a full hospital, the project team endeavored to preserve the garden court. While it went through minor modification, project leaders were able to link and integrate the garden court with an expanded outdoor space that also includes a stormwater pond.

ABOVE | *The goal of maintaining personalized care, yet simplifying and somewhat standardizing the patient experience became a driver in the design of this new facility. This goal aimed to optimize ease of use for the patient.*

Lasting impressions

Mapping the patient’s journey through an empathy lens can uncover opportunities for optimizing the environment so it feels personal and empowering. The future holds even more promise, as the ability to personalize a patient’s preference—with music, aromatherapy, custom lighting, etc.—can add another level of personalization to the process. Seeing beyond the property boundaries that often isolate healthcare facilities into islands, organizations can build welcoming and enticing communities of health that send each patient back home feeling valued and understood.

IMAGE | *This standalone cancer center in Raleigh, North Carolina, exemplifies the patient-friendly focus. The team engaged in a "mapping with empathy" approach by virtually walking different user personas through the proposed design for the new facility.*

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