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[Fall 2006 Issue](#)

[Cover Story](#)

[Featured Stories](#)

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[Book Reviews](#)

[Editor's Commentary](#)

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Fall 2006

## Bringing the Outside In: Nature Art Plays a Growing Role in Hospitals and Healing Environments



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By Henry Domke, MD



A woman with breast cancer drives to her hospital in a small Midwestern town for chemotherapy treatment. Each week, she arrives early for her appointment so that she has time to prepare. She sits in a windowless room, in front of a large picture that shows a clearing in the woods, gold sunlight streaming through green leaves and branches. The woman spends half an hour meditating on the scene, lowering her blood pressure, pulse rate, and stress, and then she begins her treatment.

This patient was fortunate—she didn't have to face a life-altering treatment in a cold, sterile environment. She intuitively knew that the forest scene, while only a two-dimensional image, would bring her a sense of peace during a traumatic time.

I know hospitals—I know how dreary they can be. People in hospitals are anxious; they spend a lot of time waiting, and staff is overworked. Even as a physician, I often find them dreary and depressing.

Architects and interior designers are starting to do something about it—by incorporating nature into the design and ambiance of healthcare facilities. They're not doing this intuitively—science is proving them right.

Growing research shows that nature, and even images of nature, in a healthcare setting can have dramatic results on patient outcomes.

Anjali Joseph, PhD, director of research at The Center for Health Design, knows firsthand about the correlation between the two.

“As an architect, I have always been sensitive to the fact that buildings have a profound impact on the people who live, work, and inhabit them,” she said during an October, 2006 e-mail interview “People who are sick and vulnerable are probably the most sensitive, and as such, healthcare environments have the most potential to either heal or harm them. I was part of the team that worked on the 2004 study, ‘The Role of the Environment in the Hospital of the 21st Century.’”

The report referenced findings by Roger Ulrich, PhD, that showed “. . . a study in a Swedish hospital found that heart-surgery patients who were assigned a picture with a landscape scene with trees and water reported less anxiety and stress and needed fewer strong doses of pain drugs than a control group assigned no pictures. Another group of patients assigned an abstract picture, however had worsened outcomes compared to a control group.”



Dr. Joseph was not surprised. “I think architects and designers, especially those in healthcare, have always been attuned to the importance of healing environments,” (all Joseph quotes are from the October, 2006 e-mail interview) she said. “However, for the longest time, there was little more than intuition and anecdotal evidence that such environments actually heal patients and are beneficial to them. With growing evidence that light, nature, art, music therapy, etc., actually impact patient healing through reduced stress, reduced perceived pain, reduced depression and so on—the case has become more compelling.”

I have seen this firsthand. As an artist and physician, I've placed many of my own nature photographs in my medical practice and have seen the impact of these images on patients. Although most of my pictures are taken at the Prairie Garden Trust, a 180-acre nature restoration site in central Missouri, I often have patients ask me if a particular photograph was taken at their uncle's farm. Or they'll say they're sure they've been to the spot in the woods that is reflected in the image.

The message to me is simple: art has the power to transport people to another time and location. And when you're in a doctor's office or hospital, anxious and stressed, this is a powerful—and relatively inexpensive—tool that can be used to calm people.

But often these decisions come down to differing priorities and cost. Art is often seen as an expendable item in the budget of a new healthcare facility, and if costs are running high, it is unfortunately often the first thing to get cut. The result: artwork is then selected by price, which means that cheaper, poster art is often used.

“It is often the ‘healing environment’ elements such as art programs or music programs that get pulled out from the budget,” said Dr. Joseph. “Unless an organization is completely committed at the highest level to providing a truly patient-centered environment, these problems will be encountered.”

One hospital has found a way to ensure that doesn't happen. Columbia St. Mary's Hospital in Milwaukee has developed an evidence-based design assessment checklist that is used at every design review session to assess their success in incorporating evidence-based design features into their project, says Dr. Joseph. “If critical elements are not being considered or are being ‘value engineered’ out, it is clearly documented for all to see.” The tool serves to remind everyone involved in design about the hospital's commitment to evidence-based design and the importance of those elements—such as art.

In addition, most hospitals tend to think of construction as a huge one-time cost—and work to trim that—without really considering the lifestyle costs and benefits that they will obtain in the long run. “There is a need to change this process so that healing environment elements are not the first to be cut out,” said Dr. Joseph.

I will continue to follow the research, but because nature, medicine, and art are my passion, I don't really need more information to be convinced of the value of nature images in healthcare environments. I experience the healing tranquility of nature when I'm photographing delicate maidenhair ferns and vibrant prothonotary warblers. I also see it every time a patient stops in a hospital hallway to look more closely at a picture of the orange petals on a blackberry lily.

A nurse at an oncology unit at Blessing Hospital in Quincy, Illinois emailed me about a patient's response to a nature photograph. “One of our patients told me how much inspiration she received from one of your pictures. She told me that while she waited for her name to be called to go back for chemotherapy, she would gaze at the picture. She said the way the sun shone from behind the tree made her think that the Lord was going to walk out from behind the tree.”

If art can provide that kind of comfort, it's really part of the healing environment.

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