

Greenhealth

A Practice Greenhealth Member Publication

Healing Environments

The New Spaulding
Rehabilitation Hospital

A Restorative
Rooftop Garden

The Test of Time

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One health care garden's response to the AIDS crisis



Design is an expression of values. Through design, we express the hopes and aspirations of our lives in the places we build to work, play, learn, and heal. And because of our response to illness, design is also an expression of understanding—of how the environment can ameliorate the physical, social, and psychological aspects of ill health. Nowhere is design's response more poignant than with emerging illnesses and the hosts of unknowns that accompany them. HIV/AIDS, with its sudden emergence, rapid spread, complex physical manifestations, and subsequent reach across social and economic lines, was and still is one of the great health challenges of our time. How can design effectively respond to health uncertainty, to the sense of vulnerability, isolation, and fear that accompanies crisis?

Historically, societies looked to nature and concepts of palliative care to address health unknowns. From the Christian hospices of the Middle Ages to 19th-century tuberculosis clinics offering fresh air and sunshine, nature offered respite, comfort, and balance—a place of calm and tranquility. A similar attitude can be found in early responses to HIV/AIDS. As our scientific and technological resources gathered momentum, this fast-unfolding crisis demanded tangible and immediate responses.

The Joel Schnaper Memorial Garden was built in 1994 to serve individuals with HIV/AIDS and their caregivers. Part of Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center, a 630-bed long-term care facility in New York City, the 3,000-square-foot garden, named in memory of a landscape architect who died of AIDS, is located on a rooftop adjacent to the Center's 156-resident AIDS unit.

The Joel Schnaper Memorial Garden is part of the Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center, a long-term care facility in New York City.

Bruce Buck/Dirtworks PC



Above: The garden was designed pro bono by Dirtworks Landscape Architects and built with donations and volunteer labor. Left: Nearly 20 years later after being planted, the garden is lush and offers a peaceful, healing spot for patients. Left: Today, the garden accommodates a wide variety of patients and their caregivers.





Our design process involved maintaining a direct and continual dialogue with physicians and nurses (and often the residents themselves) to better understand the progressive nature of the disease, its physical manifestations, varying treatment protocols, and their side effects. It also required an understanding of the psychological and social aspects of illness— isolation and vulnerability, varying perceptions of safety and privacy, and support for those in care as well as their caregivers.

While all illness is personal, HIV/AIDS, with its destruction of the immune system, is intensely personal as the body battles an onslaught of opportunistic infections. Our design needed to be an equally individual response. The design that developed followed several basic principles: to provide opportunity and choice for each individual to engage with nature on their own terms, at their own pace, and in their own way; and to create a design strategy that provides sensitivity to accommodate individual conditions with the flexibility necessary to accommodate changing circumstances.

As HIV evolved, medications also evolved. While still for many an end-of-life scenario, individuals lived longer and were stronger. The illness extended its reach into broader socioeconomic groups. As a result, residents came from a wider spectrum of society. The garden's basic structure, a series of carefully detailed outdoor spaces that vary in size, character, activity, and exposure to the elements, was able to accommodate broader needs and interests, a more active user, expanded therapeutic and recreation programs, and a more complex social dynamic.

As the garden matured, so did the facility's attitude toward it. Designed pro bono and built with donations and volunteer labor, the garden was initially a leap of faith on the part of administration to provide those with AIDS some access to nature and as much comfort as possible. This maturity brought a greater awareness of the garden's potential. Today, the garden is now a resource for the entire facility, from staff meetings and resident exhibits to fundraising events. This was evident when, in 2005, the roof membrane reached its lifespan and needed to be replaced. The administration approved the construction of a new garden that honored the original design but, with our guidance, was built with more durable materials to achieve a lifespan of 25 years.

Today, our scientific and technological responses to illness are enriched by the complement of nature and design. This "rediscovered wisdom," as the historian Sam Bass Warner put it, balances our universal attraction to nature and its restorative qualities with the complex needs of patients. But needs change— individually, through the progression of illness; collectively, as medical protocols change; and communally, as societal attitudes towards a particular illness evolve. For design to remain effective for today's health challenges, it must find ways of creating physical environments that balance specificity with flexibility. 

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To place the garden within the context of the AIDS epidemic, the illness had been spreading unchecked for years. Emerging medications had limited efficacy with serious side effects, and individual opportunistic infections and symptoms varied wildly and changed constantly. Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center was one of the first facilities established in New York State to provide care for individuals with HIV/AIDS. Palliative care was a large component of the therapeutic regimen. In seeking to expand the care they could provide, the facility looked outside to their adjacent rooftop. Dirtworks, PC was charged with finding a design response to these unknown and changing parameters.