Review: The Architecture of Health: Hospital Design and the Construction of Dignity


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The Architecture of Health: Hospital Design and the Construction of Dignity is a timely publication on hospital design written by Michael P. Murphy of MASS Design Group, an architecture and design firm in Boston, MA, known for its focus on social change and economic justice. This book provides a historical view of healthcare design showcasing how hospitals as standalone structures were developed and have evolved based on social behaviors and political factors. It explores how the design of medical spaces affects accessibility to care and the ability to meet the needs of the surrounding community.

The publication accompanies the exhibition “Design and Healing: Creative Responses to Epidemics,” on display at Cooper-Hewitt through February 20, 2023, which showcases architectural case studies alongside design proposals addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. The book’s coda discusses the pandemic’s impact on hospitals as spaces and how design can either mitigate or exacerbate challenges presented by disease. For example, ventilation and access to outside air are crucial for managing the transmission of an airborne virus.

The book profiles projects from prominent designers and architects such as Albert Schweitzer and Le Corbusier and examines the influence of Florence Nightingale’s ward design in 1859 on
political and social norms. Some of the featured case studies include Bertrand Goldberg’s Prentice Women’s Hospital and MASS’s own Butaro District Hospital in Rwanda. The book argues for hospital design constructed around human dignity, a feat it acknowledges is difficult to achieve, but one that is necessary to maintain. The result is a well-constructed argument for the essential role architecture plays in facilitating healing and constructing societies alike.

Sporting an attractively designed hardcover (no book jacket), this volume contains full page glossy photographs and architectural plans in both color and black-and-white. Although there are eight chapters, the text to image ratio is small, with the emphasis on the visual material. This is a beautiful book to flip through, exploring the evolution of hospital design through examples from around the world.

This book will surely inspire patrons interested in practical yet equitable hospital design. It is highly recommended for libraries with interior design and architecture collections and may also be suitable for health sciences or medical libraries collecting on healthcare design. For a more academic history of healthcare architecture, consult Jeanne Kisacky’s *Rise of the Modern Hospital: An Architectural History of Health and Healing, 1870-1940* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017). For a broader account of the intersection between architecture and medicine, see Beatriz Colomina’s *X-Ray Architecture* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2019).