



Academy Journal

October 5, 2009 | Print this page | Email this page

Wellness Centers and Baby Boomer Women

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

The healthcare system in the U.S. has emphasized curing disease through funding for research in, and practice of, remedial medical care during the last century. However, rising expenditures on healthcare are a major concern and Preventive medicine and healthy life styles are recognized as key factors in lowering the costs of healthcare. This is of a special interest now as the older baby boomers (those who were born in 1946-1964) are entering their sixties and will soon put greater pressure on the healthcare system from both economic and logistical perspective. In addition, this population group is expected to retire later than their predecessors. Their desire for independence and active living can be addressed through the emergence of an integrated system of preventive medicine and medical care. The wellness center, as part of the local health system, is a key component of such a strategy. And special design features that respond to the changing physical and perceptual abilities of an aging population need to be addressed in the planning and design of wellness centers, in order to insure that the elders will be able to take advantage of their resources. This study will be concerning the extent to which existing wellness centers are responding to the needs and life style preferences of baby boomers, particularly women, so they can enjoy a healthy life and general well being for a longer period of time.

Academy Journal Home

[Letter from the Editor](#)

Perspectives on the NICU Environment

Scott Radcliff, AIA, LEED AP

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

Common Mistakes in Designing Psychiatric Facilities

James M. Hunt, AIA, NCARB
David M. Sine, ARM, CSP, CPHRM

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

Redesigning the Office for Family Medicine: Promoting Efficient and Effective Work Processes through Design

Dina Battisto, Ph.D., M.Arch
Stephen Thomas, MD
Salley Whitman, CHE and
Tara Weeks, M.Arch

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

Wellness Centers and Baby Boomer Women

Ghada Mohamad, M.Arch

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

A Shared Vision: Patients, Providers, and Economics Beyond Evidence Based Design

Ed Pocock, AIA
John Barker, AIA, NCARB
Charles Huber

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)



Academy Journal

October 5, 2009 | Print this page | Email this page

Wellness Centers and Baby Boomer Women

Abstract | **Article**

Introduction

The wellness center is a new addition to the spectrum of healthcare system services that incorporate clinical and body/mind fitness components into a comprehensive healthcare center. The aging baby boom generation and the advent of managed care, along with other socioeconomic factors, are behind the trend toward building such facilities.

The successful wellness center model combines the best of traditional medicine and alternative medicine in its program of services and expresses this concept in a physical form that enhances the experience of the building user.

History

About three decades ago, academic medical centers took steps in the right direction when the results of the Framingham Heart Study in Massachusetts were among the first to relate cardiovascular disease to risk factors. This study revolutionized medicine by suggesting that there were controllable, changeable behaviors that could influence the risk of cardiovascular disease. Some of the factors that were considered in the study are high cholesterol levels, intake of a high fat diet, smoking, lack of exercise and stress. The result was a turning point in the position of self-responsibility: Changing habits could result in avoiding a heart attack. ¹

The evolution of wellness centers began with Ken Cooper's Cooper Aerobics Center, Houston, Texas, in the early 1970s which had an emphasis on diet. In 1982, the Riverside Health System in Newport News, Virginia, began one of the first wellness center programs and projects. In Melrose Park, Illinois, Gottlieb Hospital was the first in nation to create a freestanding wellness center facility, followed by the Sports Med Center for Fitness, in suburban Chicago, a 55,000-square-foot building developed by a group of orthopedic physicians. In 1991, the Galter Life Center, also in suburban Chicago, built the first freestanding urban center in the United States. ¹ Today, wellness centers are becoming more popular as part of the local health system, usually located in affluent suburban neighborhoods with members' average age (45-50).

Baby Boomers...Why Women?

The baby boom generation was characterized by the expansion of personal freedom, civil rights movement and

Academy Journal Home

[Letter from the Editor](#)

Perspectives on the NICU Environment

Scott Radcliff, AIA, LEED AP

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

Common Mistakes in Designing Psychiatric Facilities

James M. Hunt, AIA, NCARB
David M. Sine, ARM, CSP, CPHRM

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

Redesigning the Office for Family Medicine: Promoting Efficient and Effective Work Processes through Design

Dina Battisto, Ph.D., M.Arch
Stephen Thomas, MD
Salley Whitman, CHE and
Tara Weeks, M.Arch

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

Wellness Centers and Baby Boomer Women

Ghada Mohamad, M.Arch

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

A Shared Vision: Patients, Providers, and Economics Beyond Evidence Based Design

Ed Pocock, AIA
John Barker, AIA, NCARB
Charles Huber

[Abstract](#) | [Article](#)

the feminist cause. And very early in their life, Boomers were dissected, analyzed, and pitched to by modern marketers, who reinforced a sense of generational distinctiveness; in turn they were set apart from other generational gaps.⁶

Just as the definition of health has extended beyond the "body", boomers think of health from a longer-term perspective as well. Furthermore, boomers' "hippie" experiences have also allowed them to be more accepting of the mind-body connection than the past generation.⁴ However, although they want to stay young and healthy, in this era of advanced medicine, advanced technology and instant gratification, baby boomers are generally not willing to pay the price to get there; that's why the establishment of facilities that support healthy life style through mind/body activities, in combination with traditional medicine, has become necessary.

Baby boomer women were the first to bring menopause 'out of the closet', changing the attitude of advertisers, health providers, and the society in general towards menopausal women. Physical, psychological and emotional changes due to menopause do not signal extreme anxiety anymore; rather, today they are considered natural changes that can be dealt with through education, mind/body activities and spirituality so women can continue to lead an active life in the work force, retiring later than previous generations, and caring for children as well as aging parents. In addition, women play an essential role in encouraging their family members to adopt a healthy lifestyle.⁷

Now the real problem lies in the number of aging baby boomers which is estimated to be more than 78 million, more than half of which are women; expected to put a great pressure on the healthcare system.² So the role of preventive and alternative medicine expressed by adding wellness centers to the local health system and encouraged by health practitioners and health insurance companies is being emphasized to help aging boomers maintain a healthy life style longer.

Planning and Design Issues

Wellness centers take the approach of holistic health and provide the opportunity for members to receive an individual plan to improve their health and wellbeing and the ability to connect, consciously and subconsciously, healing with fun, recreation, fellowship and beauty of the environment and of an enhanced self.

Programs in wellness centers vary but in general all centers include a physical fitness area where equipments for cardio, strength and weight activities are located in addition to the indoor walking/running track. Also programs include mind/body classes, mainly Yoga and Pilates, and spa services that range from a small massage room to a center for alternative medicine offering services such as acupuncture and hypnosis.

Accordingly, the design of a wellness center needs to reflect the goals of its program providing an environment that enhance energy levels for its members and at the same time can be trusted by people in weakened physical conditions, such as aging members and those requiring cardiac rehab or physical therapy. So accessibility is of an utmost importance in all facilities of a wellness center in order to include members with a wide range of abilities; at the same time, using design features in the built environment that would enhance the ability of members and encourage them to improve their performance is equally important. Carefully designed changes in floor levels, the use of bright colors instead of pastels, allowing natural light and full spectrum light into the building and providing family locker rooms are some of the issues that deal with accessibility and need to be considered in the design process.

The use of artwork is highly encouraged; a combination of music and visual art can be used to enhance energy level in one space, and to relax and release the spirit in another. Also need to be considered in the design of a wellness center is areas that enhance social interaction between members such as clusters of comfortable seating both indoors and outdoors.¹

The clinical side

Clinical services, typically cardiac rehabilitation and physical therapy, are an important part of the wellness center's program. However, care should be taken in the design process in order to provide easy access for patients from the clinical department to other facilities in the wellness center. For example the pools area, as well as locker rooms, should be easily accessible for both general members and patients. Also access to the physical fitness equipment is important; usually during the week a number of the cardio and strength equipments are reserved at certain hours so they can be used by patients during therapy sessions instead of using separate equipments in isolated therapy rooms. This way the patients have a potential of becoming members in the wellness center in the future after their treatment sessions are over.



Figure 1: Entrance to the cardiac rehabilitation clinic

**Site Location
Building location plays an important role in the success of a wellness center. The building should be close to the local community hospital with which it is**

affiliated; however, the wellness center should not be located inside a hospital building as hospitals are usually

associated with negative feelings and unpleasant experiences. In best practices, as in Doylestown Hospital Fitness Center in Warrington PA, the wellness center is located in a medical office building (MOB) that is owned by physicians from the local community hospital so an opportunity for referrals between the wellness center, the MOB and the hospital is high.

When choosing a site, it is important to consider the size of the lot and surrounding activities. Providing pleasant landscape and outdoor areas especially designed for walking and exercising or just for relaxing and socializing are important parts of the wellness center.



Figure 2: Wellness center on the right and medical offices on the left

Building Entrance
In the healthcare settings, waiting areas have typically been designed as an afterthought. These areas appear to produce no revenue,

yet as support areas they are essential to the flow of members that fuels the engine of the wellness center as part of the healthcare delivery business. It is good business to make the entrance space important and comfortable. Besides providing seating areas for a casual conversation, the entrance can offer a relaxing place for members waiting for a class or other services through a reasonably lighted library corner with health-related magazines and books and comfortable chairs or a computer desk with internet access. On the other hand, wellness centers' management has been innovative in drawing revenue from entrance areas through pro shops that provide necessary equipment and gear. Also a small café or juice bar that offers healthy meals and snacks is a great way for members to socialize. Finally, using warm colors and tasteful artwork in the design of the entrance area turns it into a pleasant place for the members to start and end their experience in the wellness center.



Figure 3: Sitting area in the main lobby



Figure 4: Walking/running track overlooks equipment area

Physical Activities Area

The physical fitness spaces, including equipment for cardiovascular, strength and free weight exercise, walking/running track, basketball court and aerobics classes, are main components of the wellness center. In the design of the equipment area, recently built centers implemented the open space concept to combine multiple fitness equipment areas and the walking/running track through visual connection to provide a positive distraction and enhance members' energy level; other positive distractions include pleasant landscape views and small TV sets. It is important to provide spaces for stretching and benches or chairs for resting in equipment areas.

Although basketball is a popular activity for men, not all wellness centers include a basketball court in their building because of its limited use. However, when included it is preferred to locate the basketball court in a separate room to reduce the noise. In case the center decides to include an open basketball court surrounded by fitness equipment areas, it is important to use a safety net around the basketball court to protect other members from injury.

Spinning classes are very popular in wellness centers; however, the resulting noise can be a problem so spinning bikes should be located in a separate room. Windows to other activities in the center or to the landscape outdoors are desirable, but control over natural light entering the room should be provided. Wellness centers have tried to be innovative in the spinning class design; examples include using lighting equipments that can be dimmed as desired and illustrated walls in the spinning room as in Highland Park Health and Wellness Center in Buffalo Grove, IL.



Figure 5: Various lighting options in spinning class

Mind/Body Activities

Yoga and Pilates are the most common mind/body activities in wellness centers. Usually the same room is used for aerobics and yoga classes, but it is highly recommended to have a separate room specially designed for yoga classes. Room design may include oriental features, use of natural materials and a variety of natural and artificial light options.

Meditation is one way to achieve balanced healing; it is used as an alternative medicine for patients suffering from chronic diseases as well as by healthy people to improve quality of life. The Duke Integrative Medicine Center at Durham, NC included small rooms for individual meditation in its building with natural finishes and visual access to outdoors landscape. Mobile partitions can be used to divide a large Yoga studio for individual meditation as an alternative.



**Figure 6:
Individual
meditation
room**

**The Spa
Depending on
the location of
the wellness
center, a spa
can range from
a small
massage room
to an
alternative**

medicine center and beauty salon. Spa services provide good revenue for wellness centers since members are usually charged for these services in addition to their membership fees. Therefore it would be a good idea to discuss the size of expected services with the client early in the design process. Regardless of the spa size it should be located in a quiet spot in the building with a well defined entrance. Relaxing atmosphere should be provided through the use of plants, water, appropriate lighting and natural finishes in the spa's rooms and waiting area.



Figure 7: Spa Entrance

**The Pools Area
The pools area is the most popular spot in wellness centers. At least a five lane lap pool (eight lanes is preferred) a warm water pool and a hot tub should be provided.**

It is essential to make the pools accessible to all members including those with physical disability. Accessibility can be achieved through a ramp, minimum 1:12 slope, to take swimmers from deck level

to pool level. Another option is to provide a lift; although an expensive solution, using a lift would save a lot of area a slope would require. Ironically, hot tubs, despite their proven therapeutic effect for many diseases, are usually not accessible for disabled people. So until this matter is taken into consideration by manufacturers, designers may be able to come up with innovative solutions in order to make hot tubs accessible for everyone.



Figure 8: Quiet therapy room

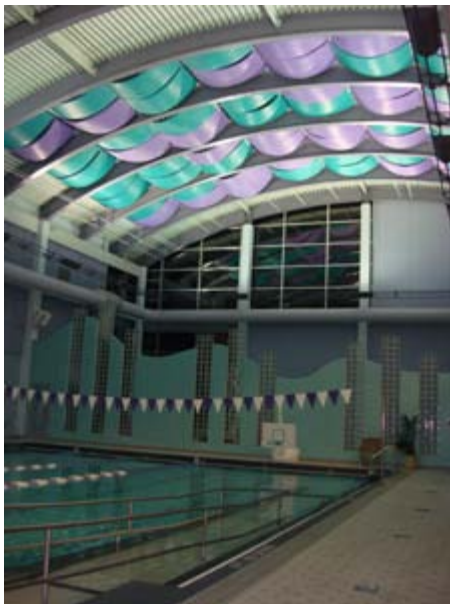


Figure 9: Warm water therapy pool and lap pool area

Educating the Community

One of the main goals of a wellness center is to provide education for its members, as well as the community, about healthy life style, individual risks for diseases and injuries and ways to prevent or minimize their occurrences. It is

the combination of traditional medicine, complementary medicine and education that forms the essence of the wellness center concept. Educational areas may include lecture room for at least 25 people, where lectures and workshops by local physicians and health staff can take place, and a small library with health education books, magazines and internet access. Also, an educational kitchen provides an opportunity for members to learn about special diets, such as those for diabetes patients and general nutritious cooking classes and at the same time cooking classes are entertaining and can be a good way to socialize with other members. Finally, in best examples health screening and other events are organized by the wellness center to educate the community at large.



**Figure 10:
Walkway at Duke
Integrative
Medicine Center**

The Green Factor Perhaps nowhere else in the design of buildings is more important to set an example for sustainability than in the wellness center. Symbolically and

practically, it is of a great importance that a wellness center be designed with materials that protect health and encourage, by example, this way of implementing healthy design into the mainstream of the community. Equally important is designing the environment to avoid harming people who suffer from allergies by using hypoallergenic materials. HEPA filters should be installed to condition the air and frequent cleaning of surfaces with non-toxic products should be implemented in the maintenance policies of the wellness center.

Conclusion

The number of wellness centers will be rising as more local hospitals and health insurance companies are encouraging the concept of preventive medicine to absorb the new wave of aging baby boomers. And as boomer women's health needs are being met, they will be more capable of caring for their family members and encouraging them to adopt a healthy life style as well. On the other hand, future studies need to address ways to implement the wellness concept among school children and in low income neighborhoods.

References

- 1. Gallup, Joan Whaley (1999). *Wellness Centers: A Guide for the Design Professional*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**
- 2. Lawton, M. Powell (2000) *The Complexity Hierarchy of***

- Behavioral Competence, Polisher Research Institute.*
3. *Burger, H. and Boulet, M. (1991), A Portrait of the Menopause*
 4. *Harris, Leslie M. (2003) After Fifty- How the Baby Boom will redefine the mature market*
 5. *American Demographics, March 1, 2003*
<http://adage.com/americandemographics/>
 6. *Gillon, Steve (2004) Boomer Nation: The Largest and Richest Generation Ever, and How It Changed America, Free Press.*
 7. *Lorilee Schoenbeck, N.D (2002) Menopause*

Acknowledgment

The author would like to acknowledge the professors from the department of architecture: Professor Gary Scott Danford, PhD, Professor Ed Steinfeld, PhD and Professor Lynda Schneekloth for their support.

Note

This article is based on a research conducted by the author in 2007 as part of a thesis submitted to the graduate school of the State University of New York at Buffalo in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture. The research included survey preparation and visits to existing wellness center facilities in New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois and North Carolina. Finally the research was funded by the Arthur N. Tuttle Jr. Fellowship in Health Facility Planning and Design; a presentation was made at the 2008 HCD conference in Washigton, D.C.

The Academy Journal is published by the AIA Academy of Architecture for Health (AAH). The Journal is the official publication of the AAH and explores subjects of interest to AIA-AAH members and to others involved in the fields of healthcare architecture, planning, design and construction. www.aia.org/aah

This article originally appeared in *The Academy Journal*, published by the AIA Academy of Architecture for Healthcare (Volume 12 – October 2009).