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# After the storm

*As architecture and interior design recover, firms focus on efficiency, branded environments and community*

A recent survey suggests the health-care sector likely will lead the construction industry into recovery next year.



Rendering courtesy HKS

by Doug Childers

**T**he last two years haven't been easy for architects and interior designers. The recession began with the collapse of an overheated housing market, and it ended with a growing crisis in commercial real estate.

During the course of the last year, new construction stopped in many sectors, and while the residential market may enjoy an uptick soon, forecasts for the commercial sector

remain gloomy.

So what's hot in commercial architecture? Forget about new high-tech devices and revolutionary breakthroughs. "The dominant trend now is survival," says John W. Braymer, executive vice president/CEO of the Virginia Society of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The paucity of new projects makes it hard to see emerging trends, even if they're there, he

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adds.

Nonetheless, sustainability — the last hot trend — has weathered the recessionary storm and emerged as an increasingly standard component of the building process, even though sustainable practices often have higher upfront costs. “It signifies that green awareness really hit its tipping point ahead of the recession,” Braymer says. “If it hadn’t had that opportunity two or three years ago, it could have taken 10 years if it had

to undergo its infancy in a recession.”

Likewise, health-care architecture has suffered less than other areas, and the pattern is forecast to hold this year. In fact, among commercial sectors, only public-safety architecture will fare better in 2010, according to the AIA’s consensus construction forecast. It calls for public safety construction to increase by 0.8 percent, compared with a decline of 0.3 percent in health-care construction.

By comparison, the forecast predicts

office construction will decline by 18.6 percent, and retail construction will drop by 17.2 percent. “The consensus forecast says the health-care market will probably lead the construction industry into recovery in 2011,” Braymer says.

A few factors drove health-care architecture through the recession:

- ✓ Funding for many of the big projects built in the last year were secured before the recession hit;
- ✓ Caring for aging baby boomers — the oldest of whom reach 64 this year — has increased the demand for new health-care facilities;
- ✓ And at least early in the recession, some experts say, the bonds that pay for many new hospitals proved easier to secure than conventional bank loans during the past 18 months. With credit freezing up, the money that drives many commercial projects simply went away.

“Even the option to use bond financing started to dry up after hospitals’ bond ratings sank when the falling stock market negatively impacted the financial reserves upon which ratings are based,”



**Pentecost**

says Ray Pentecost, director of health-care architecture for Clark Nexsen Architecture & Engineering in Norfolk and president of the AIA’s Academy of Architecture for Health. “When your bond rating declines, those projects that make perfect sense under normal market conditions can suddenly become not viable because the cost of capital has gone so high.”

In the wake of tighter budgets, hospital administrators are asking architects to create designs that minimize space requirements, says Laura Dyer Hild, director of interior design at HKS Inc. in Richmond. “Finding ways to create more efficient operations can create savings that will last the life of the building.”

The commonwealth has authorized six new inpatient hospitals in Virginia in the last two years, says Erik Bodin, director of the Virginia Department of Health’s Division of Certificate of Public

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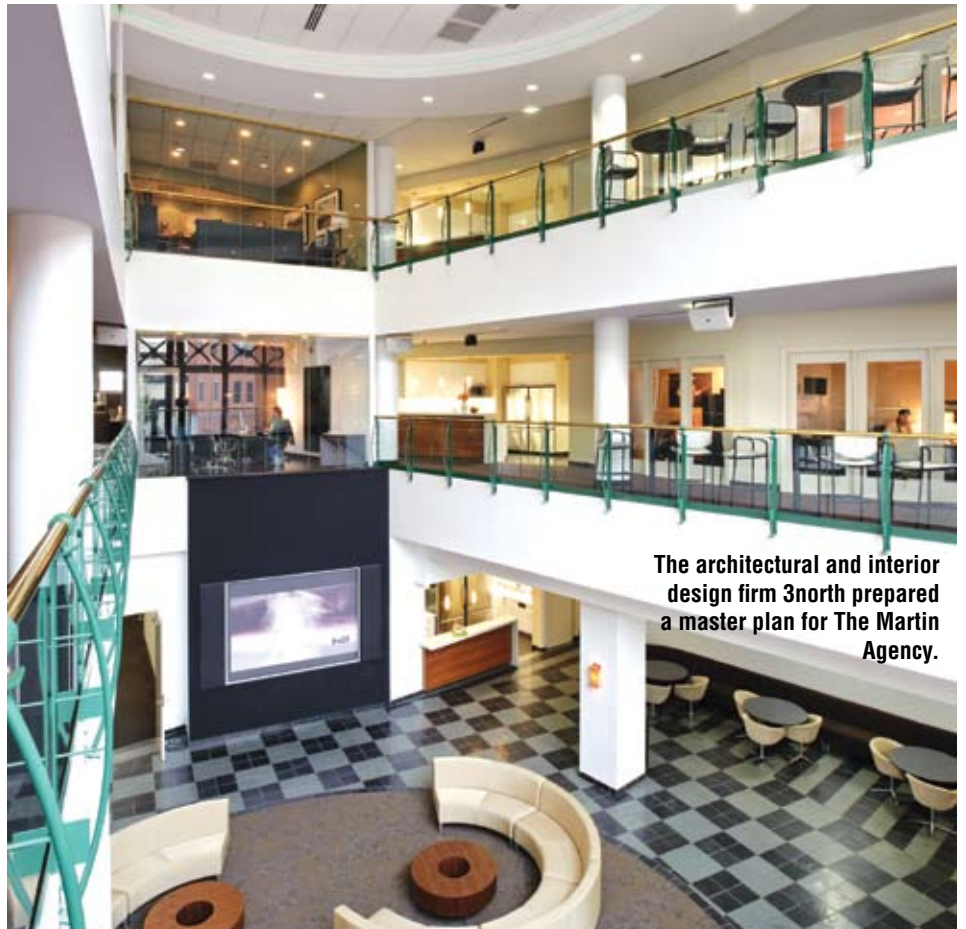
Need. All but one of those facilities — the West Creek Medical Center in Goochland County — are replacements for existing hospitals. (West Creek is a partial replacement/relocation of Retreat Hospital in Richmond.) Four other hospitals approved more than two years ago will be open by 2014. Of those, Spotsylvania Medical Center is the only new hospital; the other four — Rockingham Memorial Hospital, Martha Jefferson Hospital and Giles Memorial Hospital — are replacements for existing hospitals.

While long-range forecasts for health-care architecture are relatively sunny, Pentecost predicts the industry will see several mergers and acquisitions among health-care providers, “driven by their search for attractive economies of scale in a market experiencing downward pressures in reimbursement for care.” The timing, scale and geographies of these mergers and acquisitions will influence which projects eventually get built, he adds. “The demand for health care is largely recession-proof, but the ability to respond to demand is not.”

The news is a little better for interior design, which focuses on improving interior spaces from aesthetic as well as practical perspectives. Forecasts predict “a slow, erratic recovery in design activity,” says Sharran Parkinson, professor and chair of the interior design department at Virginia Commonwealth University. “Firms report steady gains in inquiries for new work, but they are reporting more competition for these projects,” which drives profits down.

Still, interior designers are “lucky because in a recession people will do interior work rather than do a new building,” says Kristi Pipes Lane, an interior designer and a founder of 3north, a Richmond-based architectural and design firm. “And coming out of a recession, interiors typically pick up before construction does.”

The recession shaped the sort of work interior designers undertook during the downturn, and the concepts behind those projects are now defining emerging and growing trends. The recession’s plummeting stock market and hard-hit 401(k) plans postponed many workers’ retirement plans, for example, and that has brought a greater age range into the workplace.



The architectural and interior design firm 3north prepared a master plan for The Martin Agency.

Photo courtesy 3north

“We’re seeing maybe four generations in the workplace at one time,” Lane says. “How do you make them happy at the same time?” The biggest design challenge: noise. “We have found that different generations tolerate background noise in different ways. Generation Y actually likes the noise. Baby boomers find it to be a distraction.”

One solution is to design quasi-private spaces such as small conference rooms and work cubicles. Giving everyone a private office would be too expensive and would undercut companies’ growing interest in collaboration. Employee interaction relies on open spaces where informal conversations can lead to profit-building innovations.

Consider 3north’s ongoing project for the Richmond-based Martin Agency. The ad agency wanted a master plan that would allow it to stay in its current building for another five to 10 years while improving it in ways that would help retain staff. Adding meeting spaces and teaming spaces, to boost collaboration and innovation, was

especially important. The interior design firm’s first step: Redesign the company’s coffee bars. “They’re the crossroads for informal collaboration,” Lane says.

The design makeover entailed removing walls that closed off and isolated the rooms and installing energy-efficient appliances. The new coffee bars are attractive and encourage informal interaction at a relatively low cost to the agency.

In addition, many companies are asking design firms to focus on branded environments in new projects. “The interior space helps corporations define and project their unique identities to their colleagues,” Parkinson says.

3north has focused on branding environments for years, even if many of their clients didn’t. But Lane says the recession has created one new trend, a drive for nostalgia and authenticity.

“At one time, people were looking for an escape,” she says. “Now they’re wanting their interiors to have more history, context and a sense of place. People are asking, ‘What’s really important?’” ■



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## Creating the right environment

by Joan Tupponce *Odell Associates designs health-care buildings to promote healing*

Odell Associates looks at its architects and engineers as stewards of the building environment. "We know that both the construction and operation of a facility must be designed to complement and work in harmony with the surroundings," says Roger Soto, company president and director of design.

One of the company's major initiatives is health care, an industry that is constantly changing its design concepts. "There is great concern for how to improve the way patients experience health care," Soto explains. "There is also an emphasis on safety."

Odell takes great care to design patient rooms that focus on safety as well as comfort and efficiency. "We try to create an environment to improve health," Soto says. "We make sure the environment doesn't cause any errors in treatment."

During the design process, Odell relies on behavioral research to create spaces that help health-care workers go about their workday more productively. "We design a building in a way that contributes to healing patients," explains Soto.

Berkeleigh Combs, a registered nurse who is a principal associate with the company, works with the design team during the initial phase of the project. "She looks at the design from a nursing perspective," says Jim Snyder, Odell's chairman and CEO. "She helps our people understand what makes the design better for nurses."

When Combs was consulting with designers on inpatient unit expansion at Bon Secours St. Francis Medical Center, she shadowed nurses to determine how the design could best meet their needs in regard to space utilization and lessening travel time. "We wanted to increase the time nurses spend at the bedside," Soto says.

Odell additionally addresses the growing trend toward integrating nature and spirituality into health-care designs.

"We try to create an environment that relaxes patients, families and visitors," Soto says. "Our designs take a more holistic approach by weaving hospitals into the community so they can be part of the urban fabric."

Company designers use building information modeling (BIM) software to virtually design buildings. "The traditional way architects deliver products is changing," Soto says. "We are able to do things with 3-D modeling that we couldn't do before."

Some of the productivity-related designs, such as a collaborative environment, that are popular in health care carry over to the corporate world. "There have been a lot of environmental studies that say a collaborative environment can help foster creativity," Soto says.

Sustainable designs are yet another focus for the business community. "Corporate clients are starting to want their facilities to be LEED certified," Soto says. "That makes the buildings not only more energy efficient but also healthier."

LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a certification program developed by the U.S. Green Building Council. Odell has created an educational program that trains employees in the basics of sustainability, the technical strategies of green building and the different rating tools such as LEED, Green Globes, SPiRiT and the Green Guide for Health Care. "We're seeing a lot of interesting and creative ideas about how buildings can do their jobs better," Soto says.

In talking with employees, Soto finds that many would like to work for companies that care about the environment. "They want the companies they work for to save energy," he says. "Additionally, some companies want to deliver the message to customers that they are environmentally conscious. They want the buildings they build to reflect that corporate mission." ■



Halifax Regional Hospital in South Boston reflects Odell Associates' emphasis on safety and healing in health-care architecture.

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# Sustainable furnishings

by Joan Tupponce

*LaDifférence's vendors are moving to green practices*

LaDifférence is seeing a major trend toward green, more sustainable office furnishings as businesses focus on bettering the environment.

"Europe has been the lead on green issues," says Andy Thornton, president of the downtown Richmond store. "As a store that specializes in international furnishings, we are very conscientious about sustainability and going green."

For example, two of the company's major Danish vendors, Tvilum and Jesper, which specialize in mass-produced, flat-packed office systems, have made massive changes in order to receive the highest levels of environmental certification. Tvilum and Jesper have certifications from third-party organizations such as the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification and California Air Resources Board.

"In the work environment you have gas that is emitted from glues and finishes in veneers and products made up of particle boards," Thornton explains. "You have to pay

attention to what type of glues and lacquer finishes are being used."

The goal is for companies to produce products with nominal amounts of formaldehyde so there will be no gas emissions. "We survey all of our manufacturers to rate them on the level of green," Thornton says. "We try to get as much information as possible so we know which vendors are practicing the highest level of sustainability."

Green issues are just one of the growing trends at LaDifférence. Many corporate customers are switching to ergonomically designed office furniture. "In Europe, furniture designers have really stepped things up," Thornton says. "They understand that if you are uncomfortable, it can affect productivity and overall job satisfaction."

People often relate office ergonomics to seating, but it doesn't stop there. "Height-adjustable desks such as the 7000 series by Jesper, allow a complete range of motion from sitting to standing, which has been proven to minimize your static load and increase productivity," Thornton says. "People have different body types and they work differently.

Many are more comfortable and productive standing." ■



**Jesper's 7000 series sit-stand desk allows users a complete range of motion.**