

Using ordinary looking materials in extraordinary ways



Peter Arnot

By **Peter Arnot** Director, Project Consulting Levitch Design Australia

A commercial healthcare environment is very different to a residential one and should therefore be treated differently when choosing products, finishes and lighting. There are many things to consider when asked, what is the right finish?

There is an abundance of products available on the market and as consumers, more than ever, we have a lot of choice. However, not all finishes are suitable for a healthcare environment. Finishes need to be practical, durable, comfortable and easily maintained while retaining an aesthetic appeal.

The demands of a high-use healthcare environment also mean, that finishes need to withstand more wear and tear than a residential environment. In many cases, double the traffic that it would have in a residential environment. For example – opening and closing of drawers, constant foot traffic in the reception areas and patients sitting in waiting area chairs.

The selected scheme should not reflect current fashions, as most clinical fit-outs need to last a minimum of 10 years. Certain colour combinations invoke certain responses and it is good to use this to your advantage. Combining cool and warm creates a sense of balance within the colour scheme. Strong colours can be used in paint finishes and changed at a relatively low cost whereas joinery has a longer life span which should be reflected in a more restrained selection of colour.

The demographic factors in any practice should be considered as a powerful influence on the selection of finishes throughout. Well-chosen finishes will attract potential patients and please your current patients, while satisfying your practical needs.

Many finishes within your healthcare practice will need to comply with the Australian Standards.

Floor coverings

Carpets are graded for residential and commercial usage and to different levels within those categories. Carpet tiles allow for a much higher traffic flow without showing signs of wear and tear and are easily replaceable if spillages and staining occur.

Clinical areas are intensive high wear areas because of the chair movement in a limited zone and it is prudent to consider homogenous sheet vinyls or linoleums which can be coved at the edges and heat welded at the joints. There is an enormous variety of vinyl's and linoleums in vibrant colours which can be used for great effect in the clinical spaces. We have many samples to choose from in our Centre for Healthcare Design showrooms.

Painted surfaces

Again there is a plethora of practical and decorative paint finishes (e.g. distempers, pearlescent sheens, deep suedes, metallics, washes, high gloss polyurethanes) which broaden the possibilities for the walls. The suitability of surface finish needs to be considered with the location – a good quality commercial paint is recommended for all painted surfaces, but high maintenance areas may need washable paints.

Joinery finishes

This encompasses an exciting range of old standbys and new finishes. There is a never-ending range of new releases and materials (e.g. laminates, stones, timber veneers, two-pack polyurethanes, metallic finishes).

Upholstery fabrics

Commercial fabrics are tested for the amount of wear they can endure. It is especially important to use commercial fabrics in clinical chairs and waiting room furniture.

Lighting

Lighting need not be an expensive part of the budget, but it can make or break a fit-out. The lighting needs to substantially enhance the aesthetic environment. It is recommended that a lighting colour temperature of 4,000k (cool white) is specified to practical areas of a practice with more ambient lighting (warm white) at 3,000k being used for dramatic effect in the public areas

of the practice such as waiting rooms and hallways. Task lighting is far more appealing and provides light where needed instead of a blanket of neutral light. The lighting level in the clinical environment generally needs to be much brighter than other areas to eliminate visual fatigue for the practitioner (day light temperature of 5,000k). Indirect lighting is always far more effective and perceived as gentler light. It is always a good idea to conceal the light source while enjoying the benefits of the light (with LED strip lighting).

There is more than meets the eye when selecting finishes. There are a multitude of choices to work through, but a good result makes the effort worthwhile. A successful selection will be aesthetically pleasing as well as practical and durable. ♦

