

## SPA OWNERS: VISUALIZE YOUR DESIGN

# Designing a new spa

*If you the spa owner, has already figured out what is your vision, why do you need the help of a spa designer?*

By *Sam Margulies*

**W**hen designing a new spa, there are six basic principles, which you need to consider. First, you need to define what is the purpose of your future spa.

Then, you must identify what is your vision. The next step is to realize what you want the client to experience when visiting to your spa.

When these elements are defined, then you need to look into the technical requirements attached to them. The fifth principle is "Feng Shui": to create a structure that will invite the energy to flow harmoniously in every part of the SPA. Last, but not least, the sixth principle is the budget: by deciding the budget of the project, you define the limits within which your SPA is to be built.

Let's focus on the first principle of the design process: the purpose of the spa. The first definition is inherent to your spa's environment. Is it a resort hotel spa, a destination spa, a day spa, or a cruise spa? You don't actually make a decision about that,

it is what it is unless your budget is totally (I mean: TOTALLY!!) unlimited and you just create whatever type of spa you feel like having. The next step is to define if you want a fitness spa, a salon spa, a medical spa, a wellness spa, a thalasso spa, a specialty spa or any other kind of spa. This decision could be based on your philosophy or on the demographics in your area and a local marketing study. When you know what kind of SPA you want, you can begin to go into more specifics.

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You always need to begin with the big picture and go toward the smaller elements until you get to the smallest detail. It is nice to choose a beautiful top for the reception desk, but work on the building and layout first!

When you know the orientation you want to give to your spa, it automatically defines some of the treatments you will offer. It is up to you to decide what other services you want to propose, depending in the available space. If you have a space in an existing building, you have to create your spa based on the square footage and the shape



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*In the early 1990's, Sam began to study the Chinese art of Feng Shui that plays an important role in his approach to design and architectural conception. Sam is involved in the SPA market since 1996. He has been invited as a keynote speaker in Spa shows in the USA and Canada, and is recognized as one of the leading experts in SPA conception and design.*

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## WILL YOUR SPA CLIENT HAVE THE DESIRED

of this space. If you are not restricted by an existing structure, you can design the structure, or choose an existing one, based on the square footage and the style that you will need to accommodate your purpose and vision.

In the layout, different areas are to be defined and placed according to their own needs as well as according to their place within the whole project. Let's talk for example, about a salon spa. In general, the kind of energy that you have in a hair salon is more active, interactive and "hectic" than in the SPA area. So think about how to keep these two different kinds of energy separate within the same structure. Ask yourself how would feel a client that comes for a relaxing, private SPA treatment when having to pass through the high energy of the salon space...

So begin by separating the space by type of services, type of treatments, sound level, and purpose. Some time ago, I visited a gorgeous spa, and I felt uncomfortable.

To go from the reception to the locker room, I had to pass through a long corridor with treatment rooms on each side, with people waiting in their bathrobes, as well as through a beautiful relaxation area with people on lounge chairs. With my clothing and shoes on, I was feeling out of place. A few minutes later, when I was in a bathrobe relaxing on a lounge chair, I felt that the people passing by with their clothing on were somewhat invading my retreat, bringing in, inside this sacred space, the energy of the outside world. This is a typical example of a poor layout design.

Let's go to the big picture and define different areas: Reception/retail, non spa areas (salon, coffee shop, restaurant, etc), locker rooms, relaxation area, water treatments, dry body treatments, massages/facials, specialty treatments (including medical treatments), swimming pool, fitness area. There are other possible areas, but let's focus on the most common ones.

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### 1. RECEPTION/RETAIL:

As suggested by its name, the reception area is the first place where the client comes in. It is also the last place the client pass through when going out. In most places, the reception and the retail are together in the same space. It is not a necessity, and they can each have their own space.

But to have the retail up front allows it to serve as a store for non spa clients and stimulate the retail sales and can also attract retail clients to become spa clients. Also, when leaving the spa, the best thing you would like your client to do before leaving is to buy some products, and make a new appointment for the next spa treatment. Some spa consultants have told me that retail should count for 25 to 30 % of the spa income: don't expect that kind of income if your retail space is no bigger than a closet, or just a little bigger than that. It doesn't mean that if you have a 5,000 square foot spa, you have to block 30% of its surface for the retail space, but make it large enough, and attractive

enough to generate that kind of income. (This 30% could generate up to 70% of profits)

### 2. NON-SPA AREAS:

I won't go into detail of the different types of non-spa areas and their specifications, because this entire journal will not be big enough. Let's just make clear that there needs to be a clear separation between these areas and the balance of the spa, with an easy flowing passage that will allow a smooth passage from the spa to the non-spa area, without allowing non spa clients to invade the space of the spa clients.

### 3. LOCKER ROOMS:

This is one of the most controversial spaces in a spa. Some spa owners will tell you that the locker rooms are not necessary, that they are just a waste of space, while other will tell you that their locker rooms are

## EXPERIENCE WHEN VISITING YOUR SPA?

the heart of their spas. They are both right: it all depends on your purpose and vision. If you want your clients to come only for treatments and relaxation, and not for social interaction, then you may not need locker rooms, as long as you have showers in some of your treatment rooms. Most of the spas have locker rooms that go from an oversized bathroom to a space that includes toilets, showers, sinks, steam room, sauna, big Jacuzzis, etc... Of course, they are not gender-mixed. Some spa owners do incorporate the relaxation areas inside the locker rooms, to create a kind of "men's club" and

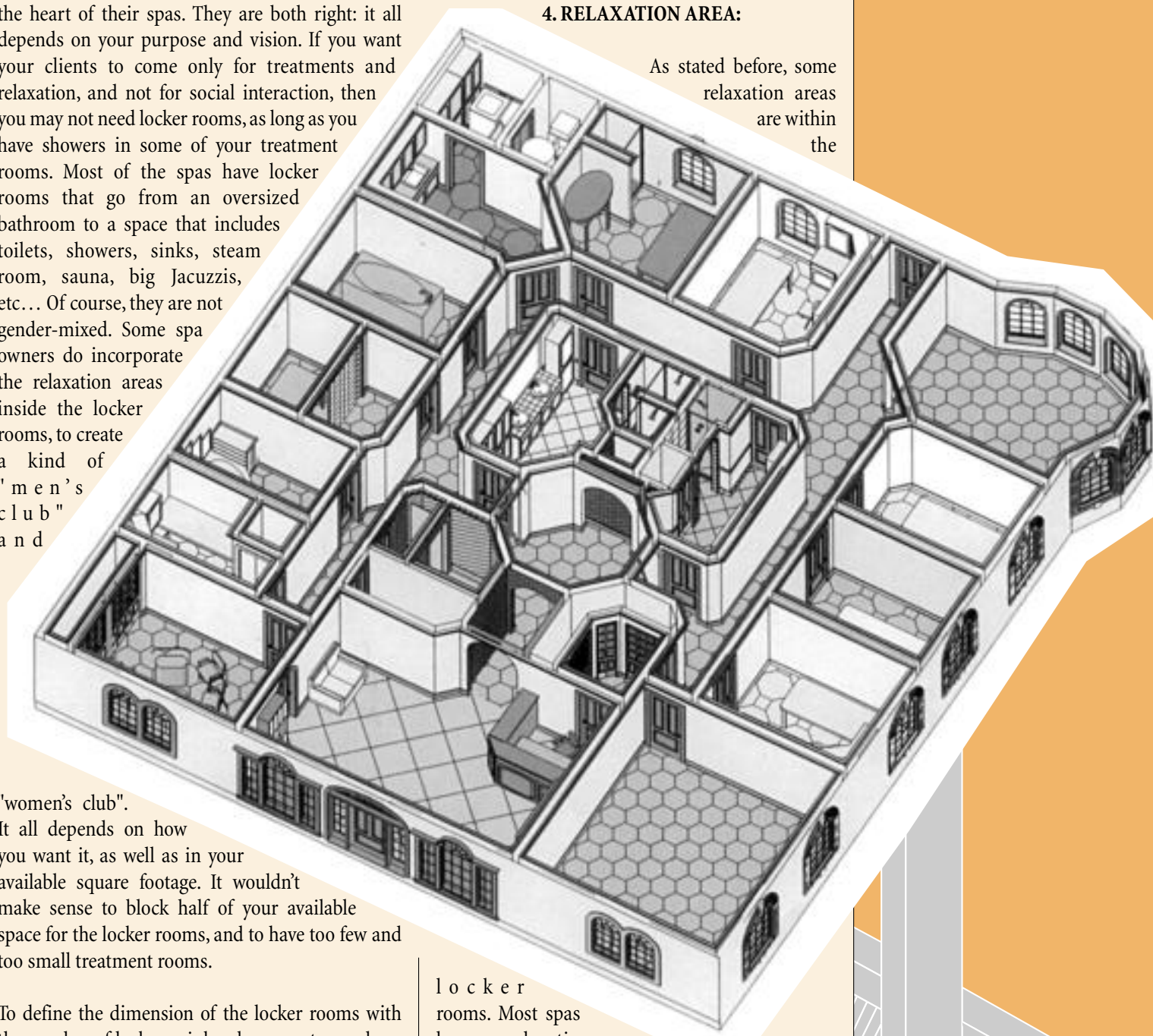
"women's club".

It all depends on how you want it, as well as in your available square footage. It wouldn't make sense to block half of your available space for the locker rooms, and to have too few and too small treatment rooms.

To define the dimension of the locker rooms with the number of lockers, sinks, showers, etc, you have to calculate the average number of people that could be there at the same time considering the number of treatment rooms, and, for example, the capacity of your fitness facility if you have one. Whatever you decide, make sure that your clients will be able to circulate in the locker rooms without being forced into physical contacts with each other or they won't come back. On the other hand, an agreeable locker room, with all amenities, might also increase the average numbers of treatments/client and retail sales/client and become an indirect income source for your SPA.

### 4. RELAXATION AREA:

As stated before, some relaxation areas are within the



locker rooms. Most spas have a relaxation area separated from the locker rooms, so that they don't need to have two of them. However, a question to consider is about having a gender-mixed relaxation area or not. Some spa owners believe that to have separate relaxation spaces for men and women are more respectful of the actual purpose of the space. Other spa owners think differently, and neither is incorrect. Once more, it all depends in your purpose and vision. I have even seen some SPAS (thanks goodness not a lot!) with no relaxation space at all... If your relaxation space is well designed, it could also be an indirect source of



## PLAN YOUR SPA DESIGN WITH YOUR CLIENT

income, if "non aggressive", passive marketing tools are included inside. Also, if it is made appealing, the client will want to return to your spa just to Basque in the relaxation experience and it will become an excuse for some clients to come more often to get a treatment. For most clients, the relaxation space is where they close their eyes to feel some serenity. To respect this time of inner privacy, make sure that there is enough space for each person.

### 5. WATER TREATMENT ROOMS:

All water treatments can be regrouped into a same area. Most likely, it will lowered the cost of the plumbing, but it will also bring together geographically treatments that can be noisy so that they will not disturb the relaxation area nor the other treatments that require more calmness. Another important issue with regrouping the water treatments is the balance of the energy flow throughout the whole spa. Think also in term of your staff: many water treatments require the presence of a staff member only at the beginning and at the end of the treatment. Having all of them in a same area could allow one staff member to take care of multiple treatments at the same time. Because of the water mass and circulation in these rooms, it is extremely important that the sizes and designs of these rooms will feel smooth and not oppressive.

This might be the most critical area in the entire spa where an energy imbalance could jeopardize the whole business.

### 6. MASSAGE / FACIAL ROOMS:

Some time ago, I visited a spa where the rooms were terribly small. I advised the owner to decrease the number of rooms by transforming every two rooms into one. At first, he

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thought that I was insane, but now, his spa income is higher with less treatment rooms than before, because clients come back now. There is no magic there. It is just a matter of giving to the client an environment where he will not feel oppressed and claustrophobic. Before transformation, these massage rooms were 7' x 9', just a big closet. Now, they are 9' x 14'.

They could be somewhat smaller, but they feel good to the client as well as to the massage therapist. His employees' turnover is not as high, and a good part of the clients schedule their next appointments before leaving the spa. These rooms are big enough now to allow him to use them as multi-purpose rooms including for facials or wraps. By respecting your spa as a place for people, clients as well as employees, and not only as a moneymaking thing, it will make you a wealthier spa owner.

### 7. MEDICAL TREATMENTS:

The medical treatment rooms are to be a separate area. First of all, don't make it look to "hospital-ish", or you will scare away the spa clientele. **You have to define what is your purpose: are you opening a medical spa, or are your opening a hospital with spa services?** In other words, if you open a spa with doctors and medical services, make it look and feel like a spa. You will attract a spa clientele that will feel comfortable with having a doctor on site who can also provide them more medical services. If you open a clinic with spa services, you have little chances to attract the spa clientele that is looking for another environment. If you are going to have patients with bandages on the face or other obvious medical accessories on their bodies, do not expect the spa clients to feel comfortable sharing the locker rooms, relaxation space, and other common

## ON MIND..... NOT YOU

spaces of the spa. It will ruin their spa experience. So, separate the areas, and make it a real spa.

When designing a spa, especially with multiple purposes like a salon spa, a fitness spa or a medical spa, it is important to create a common space where clients from different areas can meet and interact. This common place connects the different spaces, and turns the spa into one entity. The bigger the spa is, the more important it is, or your spa will become like a mall. Another important space is the corridors: it might sound strange, but corridors are as important to your spa as are the treatment rooms or locker rooms. Imagine a 120 feet long straight corridor, 3 feet wide, 12 feet high, with treatment room doors facing each other on each side of the passage... (I've seen it!) When designing your spa, avoid too long, too straight, too narrow and too high corridors that besides being ugly will create an aggressive high-speed energy storm that will take off out of the spa like a fighter pilot in his airplane.

By being too long and too straight, the corridor will create an unsafe feeling. By being too narrow, it will turn oppressive, and could force passing clients into physical contact. If it is too high, it will make it look narrower and oppressive. It is also important to avoid placing the doors on both sides of the corridor facing each other to respect the privacy of the clients inside each treatment room.

To finish, this is your business. Whatever layout and design your designer will propose to you, make sure that the average income per square foot makes sense. You want to make a profit, so that you will be able to offer to your clients a great spa experience for many years to come. When deciding to open a spa, every owner has an idea of what he/she

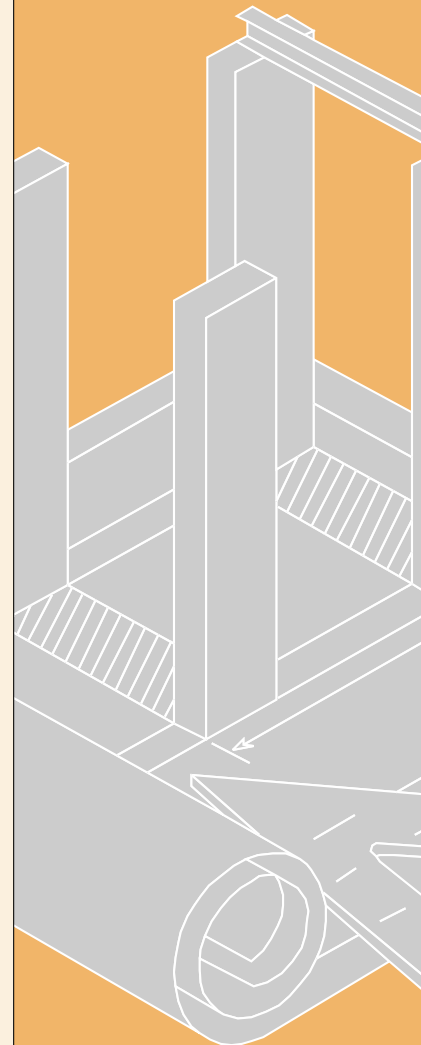
**When deciding to open a spa, every owner has an idea of what he/she wants it to be like, to look like, and to feel like. Even though the vision is there, the spa owner doesn't always know it, or is able to express it, or to materialize it. This vision is to be the foundation for the conception of the entire spa project. The materialization of this vision is what will allow the client to have the desired experience when visiting the spa.**

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What is exactly this experience that we talk about? How do you create it? If anybody here thinks that we are talking about offering to every client a free hot-dog and French fries at each visit, this is not it! The only experience that this might create would be a stomachache. The experience that we talk about is the feeling that the spa environment and the treatments will create for the clients.

It is what the clients will get from their visit to your spa, and why they will come back over and over again. So how can we create this experience? The first tool is the owners' vision. So if the owner has already figured out what is her vision, why would she need the help of a designer? The reasons are actually very simple: they are called subjectivity, distortion and professionalism.

*Subjectivity:* When you have your idea about your vision, and begin to put it



## CREATE A SPA EXPERIENCE FOR CLIENTS

together, you get emotionally involved. Because of that emotional involvement, you will not be able to analyze the effectiveness of your vision on the clients' experience in an objective manner. Because you believe that your vision is good as is, you might find justification to every objection that would be brought up either by yourself (in an honest attempt to analyze the facts), either by somebody else.

*Distortion:* This is about linking your vision to the clients' experience. When you have a vision, you see it from the owners', creators' perspective. The actual experience that your vision creates for the client might be opposite to what you think it does. For example, a spa owner called me for a consultation. Things were not going the way she wanted, the clients were not making new appointments at a normal pace considering the average in the industry, and she thought that it might have to do with the design. She explained to me that her vision for the design was based on the ancient Greece.

All of the flooring all over the spa was made of imitation marble tiles, most of the walls were painted in a faux marble, and every thing was in tones of white and gray with columns everywhere. Each room was dedicated to another mythological Greek god, with murals related to them. Don't take me wrong, the idea was good, and the client could have gotten a great experience from this design.

But the way the owners' vision got materialized had created for the client a totally different experience than the one expected. Every thing felt "cold", the warmth of the Greek mythology had turned into a "nose-up" kind of feeling, and even some of the murals in the treatment rooms had a distorted 3D perspective that could have given to anyone a feeling of nausea when coming out of a warm hydrotherapy treatment.

### Professionalism:

**Everyone has a specialty.**

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*Professionalism:* Everyone has a specialty. If your specialty is in opening and operating a spa, then this is what you should do. Nobody can be specialized in every thing. When you work on deciding what type of equipment to get for your spa, you trust the knowledge of the equipment company to tell you what are all of the technical requirements. If they tell you that for a specific tub you need a 2" diameter drainer, you won't argue that a 1" diameter should make it. You know that they know what they are talking about. For the design of your spa, it is exactly the same thing: you need a professional to tell you what is needed to materialize your vision and create the desired experience based on your vision.

So how will the designer help you to avoid the problems of subjectivity, distortion and professionalism? To avoid the subjectivity, you need to work with somebody who is not emotionally involved. Besides not being emotionally involved, he also needs to be knowledgeable, not only in all the creative and technical aspects of design, but also in the specifics of the spa

market. He will listen to you, ask you the right questions to help you express your vision and create an image of it. He will also know how to materialize this vision, how to make it happen. Based on his professional aptitude, he will question every step of the process. He will make sure that no justification will be created allowing an idea to be applied, just because it seemed to be a good one before analyzing it inside out in an objective manner.

Concerning the distortion, it is the designers' responsibility to create with your vision a structure and a design that will provide the right environment for the intended experience. Of course, the design is not the only element in the clients' experience. There are other important elements, like the

## SO THEY WILL COME BACK OVER AND OVER AGAIN

treatments and the staff manners, but the conception and design are equally important to create the right experience for the clients. Also, the quality of the treatments and of the staff can be changed for better, but it would be more difficult to have to redesign the structure and design of the whole spa.

In term of the professionalism, it is as simple as that: to get professional spa treatments, people will come to your spa, trusting your professionalism. To design your spa, trust the designers' professionalism, and before hiring anyone, make sure that they are really specialized in the spa market as a professional designer. When you have chosen your designer, the first step is to define what is the focus of your vision. Many times, the first problem is that the focus of the vision is not within the four walls of the spa-to-be, but outside of it. For example, a new spa owner called me. He had found a 2,000 sqft. space in a building for his spa. This space had a fabulous view through the windows in the back.

After speaking for a few minutes with the man, I realized that the 2,000 sqft would be too small for his project, and I told him so. However, his vision was that this view in the back was so fabulous that this had to be the right space. Another bigger space was available at the time in the same building, but not with the same view. Let's analyze what was the obvious problem in that project: The focus of the owners' vision was on the outside of the spa rather than on the inside. When people go to a place for site seeing, they don't pay for a spa treatment, but when they do so, their focus is not on site seeing. In other words, if I want to sell you oranges, and that's what you want, I'd better not fill-up my store with apples, because this is not what you are looking for, and I will lose you as client.

Actually, in most spas, the windows in the treatment rooms are covered by window treatments to give to

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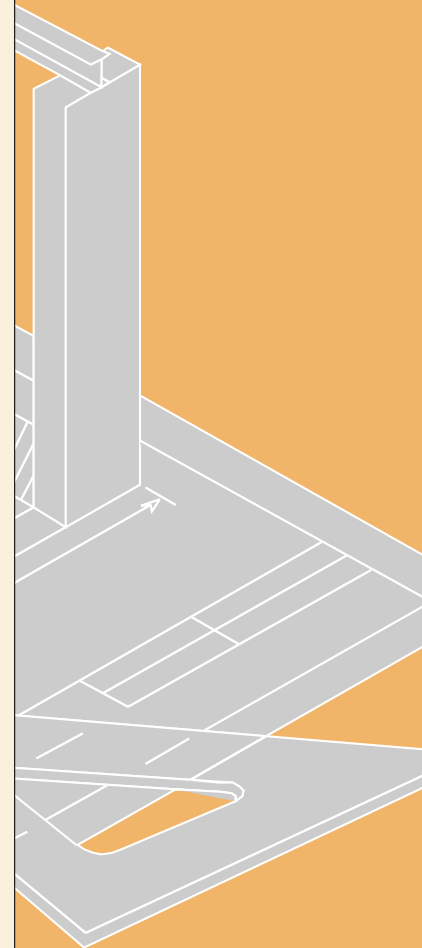
the clients the privacy they deserve to feel comfortable. So much for the fabulous view! Another important point that this story brings up is the importance of knowing first what kind of treatment rooms, and what kind of business volume you want to have in order to choose a space that will be big enough for your needs. The nicest space in the world will not be the best one for your spa if it doesn't allow you to provide the services that you intend to propose.

So it comes back again to vision. Without that, the designer cannot do the job, even if this is the best designer of the century! Actually, any good designer will never begin the job without knowing your vision, and if he does, ask him to stop, and hire another one.

The best example for me is the case of a good friend of mine that was in the process of opening a spa. Because it is in an existing resort, the owner of the hotel had asked the architect of the hotel to design the structure of the spa. The

architect asked some questions to my friend about the needed dimensions for the treatment rooms and their technical needs, and designed an addition to the hotel... When my friend showed me the surface plans to have my opinion, I had to tell her the truth: "It's terrible!". It was a narrow corridor with a series of aligned doors and looked exactly like a space designed without a vision. So I just took the plans and redesigned the whole thing after listening to her, and asking the right questions to captivate the essence of her vision. From a narrow corridor with aligned doors, it became a welcoming open space with a waterfall falling in front of a two story high window that creates a prism effect that results in an indoor rainbow that begins its course in a pound full of lilies.

I have been speaking about the clients' experience, but what is it exactly? What is this "thing" that seems to be so important that a whole article





## YOU NEED THE HELP OF A SPA DESIGNER

would be written about it in such a serious professional journal? Let's try to define it. The clients' experience is how they will feel when spending time at your spa. It is not an intellectual state of mind that we talk about. It is more of a body feeling, a heart enjoyment. If it were to be in your head only, it wouldn't be your thoughts. It would be the tingling "thing" that you can feel finding its path all the way up toward the back of your head that make you feel relaxed, contented and fulfilled. It is like what you give to your clientele that make them love themselves back again and again. The "clients' experience" is what they come for that makes them feel good, and what makes them come back again and again to your spa... And this is a healthy addiction!

In term of defining the vision for the design of the spa, let's divide it in two separate entities. The first would be the structural vision, the second the interior design vision.

By structural vision, I mean the design of the structure, or if it is inside an existing building, the design of the layout. So does the structural design have a real impact on the clients' experience? YES!!! Take for example the case of a surface plan that would be so complicated that you would have to give a map to the clients...(don't laugh, some spas should print one!) Do you think that the clients' experience would be one of a spa, or one of a maze? (Sorry I'm late for the treatment, but I got lost for 40 minutes in the corridors...) That's the extreme, but let me give you a real life example: I went to a well renowned spa for a hydrotherapy treatment. The treatment was great, the tub was amazing, but I had to wait for over 15 minutes in a cold corridor, seated on a wooden bench that was too narrow because of the width of the corridor. Today, the memory of the treatment has faded away, but the memory of this narrow bench in that cold corridor is still alive and well in my mind. I don't need to tell you that I never went back to that spa.

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Here are some more general examples. If your reception is small and dark, the client won't feel welcome. If you have a locker room for 20 people with only one shower and one toilet, the best experience of the clients will be waiting in lines, and if your treatment rooms are too small, the clients' best memories will be after leaving the spa.

The interior design vision will also have a direct impact on the clients' experience. I talked earlier about the "Greek style" spa that is a perfect example. The principle difference between the structural and the interior design influence is that the client, most of the time, will be able to tell you what in the interior design ruined his experience, because it's right under his nose, he can see it. Sometimes, the client might be able to see beyond what could be, for example, a color problem, and enjoy his visit. When it is about the structural design, the client, most likely, will not be able to pin point the reason of his uncomfortable feeling, and that's where your chances to lose clients is the highest.

So how can you avoid these types of mistakes that could jeopardize your entire spa project? By making sure that your vision will be materialized in a manner that will respect the clients' experience. To do so, work with a professional that is really specialized in the spa market as a professional designer. He will begin his collaboration with you by listening to you, and asking you all of the necessary questions.

By doing so, you will be able to see your vision being materialized in a manner that will create the right experience for your clientele. To finish, this is your business. Your vision links to the clients' experience, that links to the bottom line! You want to make a profit, so that you will be able to offer your clients a great spa experience for many years to come. ■