

Designing for Wellness

Key considerations for healthcare, fitness, and therapeutic environments that support the people who use them.

A GUIDE FROM HARMONY HOUSE

Designing for Wellness: A Harmony House Guide

Wellness design has accumulated a set of clichés — biophilic everything, Japandi aesthetics, the obligatory living wall. The reality is more specific and more demanding: a wellness environment is a room that needs to do a precise job for the nervous system of the person using it. This guide addresses the design decisions that determine whether a wellness space genuinely supports its users — or merely signals that it intends to.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is organised around the decisions that most determine whether a designing for wellness: a harmony house guide project succeeds. Each section addresses a distinct design consideration — the questions to ask, the trade-offs to understand, and the principles that guide our approach. Use it as a framework for your own project conversations.

01

Understanding the Specific Wellness Brief

Not all wellness spaces are the same. A chiropractic clinic asks the nervous system to release tension and trust; it needs calm, warmth, and a sense of safety. A fitness studio asks the body to exert; it needs energy, visual quality, and an environment that makes people want to push harder. A medical clinic needs to avoid clinical associations while meeting healthcare operational requirements. Each of these is a different brief, and each requires different design responses.

The first step in any wellness project is articulating — with precision — what the space needs to do for its occupants at each moment of their experience. That brief, written clearly, becomes the standard against which every design decision is evaluated.

- Define the emotional arc: what does the person feel on arrival, during their experience, and on departure?
 - Identify the primary sensory challenge: noise, light, smell, or temperature
 - Map the operational flow: what sequence of spaces does the user move through?
 - Distinguish public-facing zones (reception, lobby) from treatment zones — they require different design approaches
-

“The question is not what a wellness space should look like. It is what it needs to do — for a specific body, in a specific context.”

02

The Threshold: The Most Powerful Moment in the Building

The threshold — the first five feet of a space — may be the most powerful real estate in a wellness building. This is where the autonomic nervous system makes its assessment: safe or unsafe, calm or anxious, cared for or processed. The design of the threshold is an opportunity to immediately shift the visitor's physiological state, and it is consistently underused.

Layered softening is the most reliable technique: hard exterior materials giving way to warmer interior ones; a slight ceiling drop creating enclosure before the space opens; lighting transitioning from cooler exterior colour temperatures to warmer interior ones. No single element produces the effect — it is the accumulation of small signals that together constitute a change in register.

- Material transition at entry: from hard/cool to warm/soft within the first few feet
- Ceiling height: a slight compression at entry followed by expansion reads as welcome
- Lighting colour temperature: transition from 4000K (exterior) to 2700–3000K (interior)
- Sound: a quiet lobby is more powerful than any material choice
- Scent: deliberate but subtle — avoid synthetic fragrance in healthcare contexts

03

Material Warmth and the Touch Test

In wellness environments, we apply what we call the touch test to every material we specify: what does this feel like when you run your hand across it? What does it do to your breath? Cool glass and brushed metal communicate precision and competence — both appropriate in wellness contexts — but they need to be balanced by something warm and organic. Without that balance, the space reads as clinical regardless of its aesthetic intentions.

Natural wood, textured plaster, woven textiles, and stone with visible natural variation all carry warmth that manufactured surfaces cannot fully replicate. Even in healthcare environments where durability and cleanability are non-negotiable, these materials can be incorporated at strategic touch points — the reception desk, the seating area, the threshold — to shift the room's register significantly.

- Identify the "warm anchor" in each zone: the material that signals care and quality
- Textured plaster outperforms flat paint in wellness contexts — the variation carries depth
- Upholstery in waiting areas should be warm in tone and high in perceived comfort
- Healthcare-grade materials have improved significantly — durability and warmth are not opposites
- Flooring transition: hard at the entrance (durable, easy to clean), soft in treatment zones where possible

“The body keeps score, and so do rooms. The surfaces people touch signal care even before they are consciously registered.”

04

Lighting for Calm, Performance, and Compliance

Overhead fluorescent lighting is the single design element most responsible for the clinical feeling of healthcare and wellness environments. It is cheap, efficient, and incompatible with the experience most wellness operators want to create. Replacing it with layered warm-white lighting is one of the highest-impact design interventions available.

The lighting brief in wellness spaces is more nuanced than in residential environments: reception areas need ambient warmth and task capability; treatment rooms need adjustable intensity for clinical use; corridors need enough light for safe navigation without feeling exposed. Each zone has its own lighting requirement, and the system should be designed to meet all of them.

- Avoid overhead fluorescent in all patient/client-facing zones
- Specify warm white (2700–3000K) in reception, waiting, and corridor areas
- Treatment rooms: adjustable-intensity fixtures on separate circuits
- Medical-grade lighting requirements vary by jurisdiction — verify with your contractor
- Emergency and exit lighting should be integrated into the design scheme, not applied after the fact

05

Operational Intelligence: Designing for the People Who Work There

Wellness environments are workplaces as well as client-facing spaces, and the experience of the staff who operate in them matters both ethically and operationally. A receptionist who has a clear sightline to the entrance, a workspace that is ergonomically considered, and storage that is genuinely adequate will provide a better experience to clients than one working in a space that is visually beautiful but functionally compromised.

Operational intelligence means designing the back-of-house functions — storage, staff circulation, supply access, waste management — with the same care as the client-facing zones. In our experience, it is in the operational details that the difference between a wellness environment that works and one that merely looks good is most clearly felt.

- Reception sightlines: the person at the desk should see the entrance clearly
- Staff storage and locker facilities should be genuinely adequate — not afterthoughts
- Supply access: consumables should be accessible without crossing client-facing zones
- Acoustic separation: treatment rooms require sound isolation from reception and corridor
- Medical-grade infrastructure (where required): plan wiring, gas, and drainage in the design phase

06

Brand and Space: Making the Environment Do the Marketing

A well-designed wellness environment is the most effective marketing asset a practice can have. People remember how they felt in a space before they remember what they were told. A clinic or studio that signals investment, care, and quality through its physical environment sets a standard of expectation that the service itself then needs to meet — and that creates a powerful incentive for both the operator and the design team to get it right.

Brand integration in wellness environments is most effective when it is material rather than graphic. A colour palette that is genuinely distinctive, a signature material or texture that recurs throughout the space, a quality of light that is immediately recognisable — these are more durable and more powerful brand elements than a logo applied to a wall.

- Define two or three material signatures that carry the brand through the space
- Custom artwork and signage should be commissioned alongside the design, not specified afterwards
- Scent is a powerful brand element — introduce deliberately and consistently if at all
- Photography of the finished space is a marketing investment, not a design cost

“People remember how a space made them feel long after they have forgotten what they were told.”

OUR WORK

Selected Projects

The following projects represent our applied work in this category. Each was approached as a unique design problem — shaped by the client, the site, the budget, and the brief. Visit harmony-house.com to see full photography.

LUX Chiropractic

Bainbridge Island, Washington

A full-service chiropractic clinic designed to feel nothing like one. Warm materials, layered lighting, freestanding furniture fixtures that bring human scale to the treatment rooms, and a threshold sequence designed to shift the nervous system into a receptive state before the first appointment begins. Full construction management scope.

Lighthouse Fitness

Bainbridge Island, Washington

A fitness studio designed around the insight that members work harder in environments that signal quality. Lobby, workout floor, beverage center, retail zone, and balcony — each designed to make the experience of being there feel like the destination rather than the obligation.

Bainbridge Direct Primary Care

Bainbridge Island, Washington

A direct primary care clinic designed to actively contradict the clinical associations of medical environments. Residential-quality materials, a hallway mural commissioned as part of the design, and medical-grade infrastructure coordinated through full construction management.

READY TO BEGIN?

Let's Talk About Your Project

Harmony House has designed wellness environments for chiropractic, fitness, and primary care contexts — each requiring a different design response to the same core challenge: creating spaces that genuinely support the people who use them. We would be glad to discuss your project.

Website	harmony-house.com
Email	hello@harmony-house.com
Phone	206.207.2889
Location	Bainbridge Island, Washington