

Creating Wall Murals Built to Last at Shriners Hospitals

Date : 03/01/2019



Hope and Healing

The mission of Shriners Hospitals for Children is that all care and services are provided in a family-centered environment. The new Lexington Shriners Medical Center is no exception. Any fears or anxieties that the children might have when they enter the center are met by a soothing 40-foot-long, 7-foot-tall photographic landscape of the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia. Mounted on a sweeping canvas of durable [a³ CeramicSteel](#), the photo features verdant hills in the foreground meeting blue ridges in the background. Graphic illustrations are superimposed onto the landscape: a yellow sunrise with rays, pale-blue clouds, and blush-toned birds. They're placed there like a wink to the young patients, saying, "This is a safe place."



From the beginning design stages of the new state-of-the-art ambulatory surgery center, artwork was of highest priority. “We knew that we wanted to have graphics, art, and engaging pieces in all of the patient-care zones,” says Jessica Mistretta, senior associate at [SRG Partnership](#), the architecture firm commissioned for the hospital project. “We always want to make sure that we have things engaging and interesting for the kids and families.” SRG’s Portland, Oregon office worked with the New York-based applied- materials company, [DesignTex](#), and its Portland, Maine-based Surface Imaging creative team to develop the imagery.

Because of the number of orthopaedic patients that this facility sees on crutches or in wheelchairs that could bump into walls—not to mention tots with markers and crayons wanting to draw on walls—these wide expanses of art couldn’t be fragile or easily scuffed. After exhaustive research, DesignTex’s studio recommended PolyVision’s CeramicSteel, a near-indestructible porcelain-on-steel surface cladding for the high-traffic areas, from waiting areas to elevator cabs. “CeramicSteel is the crème de la crème of printable substrates,” says Joanne Rarangol, one of DesignTex’s imaging specialists in San Francisco. “It has what is highly requested for many projects especially within healthcare: durability, cleanability, bacteria-resistant properties, fire-resistance, scratch-resistance, graffiti-resistance and our clients have a positive reaction.” All totaled, 88 digitally printed [CeramicSteel panels](#) were planned to compose 12 murals for the three floors of the medical center.

A New Beginning

Shriners Hospitals provides care to children from birth to 18, though sometimes that's extended to 21. "We see a wide range of ages, developmental milestones, mobility, mental growth and adventure," says Morgan Hall, Public Relations for Shriners Medical Center. "With the scope of children and teens that we treat and the length of time that they are with us, it was essential that our new medical center be built to last. Children bring life and adventure to a facility and we wanted to make sure that all our products did as well."

In a children's hospital especially, there are two parties that need extra love and care: the younger patients and their adult caretakers. For the wider adult appeal, Designtex's Surface Imaging creative team sourced and tested photography that would print at a very large scale—with some images spanning 50 feet. Ultimately, the team settled on a theme of seasons, picturing iconic scenes from Kentucky and the surrounding states that the medical center serves: Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Tennessee, and Indiana. "We needed to not make it too pediatric," Mistretta says, "because Shriners keeps seeing patients until they're at least 18. We needed art that was relatable to the entire patient population, parents included." In one corridor, there's a picture of a midwinter forest, covered in fresh snow. In another, a picture of spring, with trees in bloom. In a third, a picture of a summer river, rushing over rocks. The bridge on the third floor has a photo of kids laying in a bed of clover, ringed by smiling graphic flowers.





To keep the connection to Lexington Shriners Medical Center's history, the Designtex Surface Imaging team called upon Maine-based photographer Ryan Shimala to document patients at the Medical Center's yearly sponsored horse camp for the center's gym mural. The team also called upon Tennessee-based photographer Joshua Dudley Greer to photograph the old Lexington Shriners Hospital on Richmond Road for the second-floor elevator lobby. "I love that it creates a sense of place for the medical center, tailored to the patients, to the location, and yet with a connection to the previous hospital," says Karen Gelardi, Principal at Designtex for digital products. "The patients, staff, and families will be able to feel a sense of ownership of the space. Their feedback helped shape the direction of the artwork and the Shriners community was first and foremost in all aspects of the design process. You can feel that this space is for them." To make sure all of these custom images reproduced well, the team carefully managed color and print quality during the pre-press process.



Then the team brought in artist Christopher David Ryan, a beloved graphic artist out of Portland, Maine, to add extra warmth for the younger set with graphic illustrations, adding a family of animals to each season. For example, the third floor waiting-room wall features a large photograph of brilliant trees in their autumn splendor, so for each exam room in that corridor Ryan designed a respective owl, deer, fox, mountain lion, and bear. He created a total of 25 animals for the center's exam rooms. (Animals were a visual theme in the previous hospital, so the carrying over of animal illustrations into the exam rooms of the new medical center also helps connect the two.)

Beyond adding a sense of cheer to the building, the CeramicSteel murals and graphics throughout the medical center also serve as landmarks, helping with wayfinding. Staff can direct people to a corridor by season, for example, and from that season's waiting room, to an animal-themed exam room. "Some of the corridors can get pretty long, with 10 or 12 patient rooms," Mistretta says. "Nurses can tell the patient, 'We're going to the room with the bear on it.'"

Art as Therapy

While healthcare providers have always had a hunch that artwork could be therapeutic to the sick and healing, today, growing research in the field of evidence-based design is proving it. Observable signs of patient improvement when exposed to art include shorter hospital stays, less pain medication, less stress, lower blood pressure and heart rate, lower ratings of perceived pain, better satisfaction with healthcare services—and even economic outcomes such as lower cost of patient care.

A 2003 study by the Society for the Arts in Healthcare and the National Endowment for the Arts notes a third group that benefits from artwork in healthcare environments: the doctors and nurses who work in these environments every day. Over half of the hospitals in the United States that have arts programs report that they do it for the hospital staff, to reduce stress, burnout, and turnover. Mistretta knew they hit the mark on this project when she was on site and the director for patient-care services gave her a big hug. She told Mistretta how much she loves the graphics, noting that both patients and staff like to take pictures with the art.

"We didn't want exam rooms with all-white walls where all you see is the equipment," Mistretta says. "We were trying to take the clinical aspect out of the patient experience."

Indeed, the final medical center is now a destination, not a drudgery.

[See Project Details](#)

About PolyVision and Designtex

In December 2015, PolyVision and Designtex (both Steelcase companies) formed a natural partnership, creating a one-of-a-kind offering. Designtex's deep connections to the design community, extensive image portfolio and expertise on [Surface Imaging](#) coupled with [PolyVision's unique product offering](#) and ability to play in demanding environments, make an ideal partner for architects and designers.