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Halvorson Design's "peaceful" green roof is a therapeutic success at Mass. General Hospital



Craig Halvorson

The award-winning Howard Ulfelder, MD, healing garden at Mass. General Hospital Cancer Center unites two contemporary trends in landscape architecture, green roofs and therapeutic landscapes. Designed by Halvorson Design Partnership, in conjunction with architects Cambridge Seven Associates, the healing garden has served as a touchstone and inspiration for green roof and healing garden development nationwide.

Located on the eighth floor of Mass. General's Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care, the 6,300 s/f garden is an oasis for patients, their families, friends and caregivers. The garden offers these individuals a mentally and physically restorative space where they can seek and find comfort, inspiration and strength.

A place for contemplation and healing. "The therapeutic value of a quiet, meditative environment for individuals affected by a serious illness like cancer is widely recognized," said Bruce Chabner, MD, clinical director of the Cancer Center. "The healing garden is an important complement to the excellent clinical care we provide here."

The Cancer Center recently completed an assessment of the garden's impact on patients, by studying more than 1,600 comments from the garden's guest book, which provides a way for visitors to share their thoughts and comments.

An overwhelming majority of visitor comments were positive, describing significant psychological, physical, spiritual and social benefits experienced after spending time in the garden. Above all, visitors expressed gratitude for such a beautiful space to visit when they were experiencing the physical, emotional and spiritual demands of cancer. Many people used the words beautiful, wonderful and peaceful to describe the garden.

The study, entitled "Holistic Oncology: A Healing Garden Guest Book," was published in the medical journal, *The Oncologist* (July, 2008). It concludes that the healing garden is indeed "a place of sanctuary and of healing that complements the work of medicine," as envisioned by the healing garden's original advocates, The Friends of the Mass. General Hospital Cancer Center. The study's authors "hope that other cancer centers will pursue the same end."

Design intent. Halvorson Design sought to create a space that would allow people to feel connected to the world beyond the hospital, even as they are embraced in a natural setting:

- * The design uses natural materials, such as granite, copper, water and plants, surrounding visitors with texture, beauty and fine craftsmanship. Dramatic views of Boston, Cambridge, the Charles River and distant hills can be seen through transparent glass walls at the roof's edge.

- * A small lawn rests at the center of the garden, surrounded by intimate niches for sitting, enabling visitors to find quiet and solace even if other people are using the garden.

- * Visitors enter the garden through an elegant glass pavilion. Lush interior plants and comfortable chairs give the pavilion a "garden" feel, permitting visitation during colder weather or inclement conditions.

- * Chemotherapy can heighten sensitivity to smells and bright sunlight. To counter these effects, no fragrant flowers are used and shade trees provide protection from afternoon sun.

A co-operative design. Early on, the Cancer Center established a garden oversight committee comprised of doctors, nurses, chaplain, social workers, administrators and cancer patients. The committee advised the design team on the specific needs of cancer patients, as well as the kind of emotional support which patients and their families seek. The committee met with the design team regularly during the design phase, helped to resolve issues that arose during construction, and continues to support and manage the space now that the garden is open.

Halvorson Design also worked closely with Cambridge Seven Associates (C7A), designers of the state-of-the-art Yawkey Center, an award-winning building in its own right. C7A designed the healing garden's pavilion, addressed building interface issues and collaborated on the design of the outer glass wall.

Halvorson Design: taking green roofs to a new level. Halvorson Design has been recognized as a leader in green roof design for many years. The firm's extensive portfolio of over-deck landscapes have greened the tops of parking garages, highway ramps, piers, hotels, condominiums, health care facilities and even a supermarket.

Most recently, Halvorson Design was chosen by Boston Architectural College to design a demonstration green roof for its signature building on Newbury St., together with a "green street" treatment for the adjacent public alley.

Craig Halvorson, FASLA is the president and founding principal, Rob Adams and Christopher Greene are senior associates at Halvorson

