

With Respect, To Water: Currents in Hydrotherapy

© Copyright Laurie MacMillan 2008-2010

Given my line of work, I guess it isn't much of a stretch that I would start thinking about hydrotherapy while steeping in a Costa Rican waterfall of magma-heated rain water. As I slowly poached in the magnificent hot springs of the Tabacon Resort at the base of volcanic Mt. Arenal, I wondered how a mere mortal spa designer could ever hope to create a spa such as this one that Mother Nature had made for us lucky souls in which to luxuriate. This place brings shame to even the grandest of man-made spas. How can we aspire to such natural splendor? Let's follow the creative process of the original designer...

The *Great Barrier Reef*. The *Grand Canyon* – Mom tends to go big, and big is definitely a trend we are seeing take hold in hydrotherapy. For example, we are seeing the introduction of large, self-directed wet areas such as the Qua Baths and Spa at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. Jennifer Lynn, Director of Spa and Salon Services, commented on the reception to Qua Baths: "I have seen an evolution in the spa industry toward the group experience. Guests love that they can share their spa time with others. It allows them uninterrupted time together to talk and enjoy each other's company. Most people travel to Las Vegas with others, and this offers the perfect opportunity to do something together."

Kimberley Matheson, President of Natural Resources Spa Consulting, agrees: "Larger areas are wonderful for spending time with loved ones and friends. Group spa experiences are becoming so popular that these magnificent wet areas work well for visiting. If created right, there are opportunities for F&B in little alcoves. It's fun to sit in a heated area and visit."

I have to wonder, with savvy spa-goers demanding ever more innovation to their spa experience, what the ramp-up will be from here. Will we see self-directed public baths the size of Sea World at every resort worth its salt? Or will the pendulum swing back to personalized, private treatments at the hands of trained therapists? Will the "social" aspects of these large, communal wet areas be enough to solidify this trend into a spa staple, or are they destined for the fad files?

The answer, partly, may be – location, location, location. Large, public wet areas will most likely be more popular in major vacation destinations like Las Vegas or Hawaii than they will be in suburbs of Boston and St. Louis. The introduction of co-ed, swimsuit-optional baths also begs the question – are Americans, um, ready for this? Judy Singer, co-owner of Health Fitness Dynamics, Inc., offers this perspective: "It does work. The first large wet area in the US was the Grand Wailea in Hawaii (opened in 1991). HFD played an advisory role during the design and pre-opening period. Their 'terme' area has been highly successful as an experience-differentiator, and a great profit center. In terms of nudity, we suggest that in any 'spa playground,' there should be a 'clothing optional' protocol but depending on the geographic location, the spa operator may want to set up guidelines. I do not think Americans will ever be as physically liberal as Europeans with co-ed, no clothing playgrounds."

Ivonne van Loveren of Natural Resources agrees: “Americans will not get naked! Shared wet areas are getting more popular but most Americans will want to wear bathing suits. Locker rooms are having to get larger now to accommodate separate wet areas for single-gender user groups.”

Mindy Terry of Creative Spa Concepts observes that, “Large public wet areas are becoming more effective and appealing to U.S. consumers. Because these areas are often an amenity to the spa, guests see them as a value-added component to the overall spa experience. We have noticed that co-ed wet areas are not utilized as much as gender specific spaces. However, although guests may not always opt to use the co-ed wet areas, we have found that they perceive spas who offer these types of amenities as providing a better overall spa experience than those who do not.”

Kimberley Matheson: “ Yes, people are using these spaces, paying for them and enjoying them. We know that guests will return to a spa not only for the treatments that happen in private rooms for an hour, but also for the relaxation amenities, wet areas, fitness opportunities, etc.”

Deborah Smith, President of Smith Club & Spa Specialists, sees privacy as more compelling than partying: “Privacy in our culture is important to wellbeing. This is especially true in a 5 star spa where most guests are less likely to expose themselves in body and spirit. We prefer to make private spaces where clients can decompress.”

Vegas notwithstanding, Chris Henkin of WTS International agrees on the nudity issue, but is more hopeful on non-co-ed scenarios: “We don’t see this as having very much appeal to co-ed user groups, but the future for continued growth in single-sex group wet areas looks strong to us.” As for the longevity of the social concept in general, he says, “Yes, the social aspect of these large wet areas is working here, but it is still in its infancy. It is coming along slowly right now but will increase in importance.”

When asked what other trends he sees taking form, Chris spoke of movement toward an international and historical approach: “Interest in the bathing traditions seems to be growing. We have a client in South Florida interested in doing a spa based on the Russian ‘banya.’ The ‘hammam’ from North Africa & the Middle East is popping up in a number of venues, as well.”

Could be that rampant, cold technology is awakening a more emotional, even spiritual need to revert back to the gentle, arcane rituals that brought quite civilized but less technical communities together. The Russian banya reached mythic status through the more creative writings of the ancient historian, Herodotus, when he wove the tale of Hercules traveling to the Black Sea to witness “strong and mighty men” partaking of the intense, detoxifying heat of these Russian saunas. Now, mighty men and women in South Florida may soon be able to test their mettle in a modern version of this ritual that gave pause even to Hercules.

The hammam, a traditional “Turkish bath” or communal steam bath, was also a place for social gathering

and ritual cleansing, often housed in an architectural structure associated with special customs. Perhaps the growing interest in traditional, old-world bathing rituals is yet another offshoot of internet-spawned global shrinkage. It's a small world after all, but a big trend in spa development by all reports. At the same time, with the whole world coming at them on full bandwidth, people may be feeling the need to turn inward, together or privately. More on that later.

Sink or swim?

Judy Singer on the fate of the large: "I think they will endure... if done well. As with anything else that is new, there is the danger that it can be a trendy, expensive-to-build area that experiences limited usage. Europeans have enjoyed much success with their 'spa playgrounds,' but they typically use it as a complimentary area to sell hotel rooms and boost occupancy. In the US, we use 'facility areas' as spa profit centers. I think we need to be very careful to understand the market and determine if the 'spa playground' concept is appropriate. We believe that when creating and selecting spa experiences, they need to be market-driven and trend-sensitive. The spa industry is not made of a series of features that are appropriate for all settings. This is not a 'one size fits all' industry. So, when properly done for the right market, we think there is validity in offering a 'spa playground' experience."

Deborah Smith: "Fad, if created just for the wow factor, but they will continue if these spaces add value." Will the social aspect work in the US market? "Only in the sense of a swimming pool where people can 'play in the water' or lounge about, but always with a swimsuit on. The nude scene is not popular for most generations in the US, especially women over 50." Amen.

What might the progression of these areas be, in an effort to stay ahead of the curve of expectation? Chris Henkin: "We think that these areas may, for some user groups, become the primary reason for coming to the spa – we see a revival of 'taking the waters' in the making, and locales that have natural hot springs, spring-fed pools and the like will multiply or see a resurgence in popularity, as the case may be. The rising importance of water amenities is also a version of 'bringing the outside in,' in many situations. We think that simple things like having a terrarium wall in the steam or sauna is an example of this. Likewise, having one wall of a shower as a full-length window into an enclosed garden can have the same effect. Outdoor showers such as those found in Hawaii and the Outer Banks of NC also add something to the shower experience."

Let's get small.

On the other side of the fence with regard to hydrotherapy trends is the more experiential, singular treatment. How is the public responding to private hydrotherapy treatments as opposed to more communal waterplay? Mindy Terry: "In the U.S. as opposed to Europe, we put the 'cart before the horse'. For the most part, we started with the smaller, individual 'cost' methods and then moved into the larger 'complimentary' areas. I believe that once the U.S. consumer better understands hydrotherapy's benefits, they will evolve back to where we started in the industry, to more personalized treatments. In turn, spa operators will be better educated—more equipped to develop these types of treatments and market them."

Some of the more interesting private treatments emerging are coming in the form of stereo baths that carry the vibrations of the music through the water and consequently, through you; “experience” showers that incorporate chromatherapy and sound; even a reflexology-based treatment that combines hot/cold therapy with a stimulating walk on smooth stones. Private and simple, but experiential and therapeutic.

Several equipment manufacturers are introducing the “experience shower” to their repertoire. Bradford offers a fully-customizable shower that delivers sound, chromatherapy lighting, aromatherapy and varying water temperature and pressure to simulate a range of natural experiences from “Tropical Rain” and “Island Storm” to “Arctic mist.”

Other private therapies go to the opposite extreme from the social experience, all the way to sensory deprivation. Deborah Smith: “We are finding new ways to use the concepts and benefits of isolation tanks first used by John C. Lilly in 1954, when he tested the effects of sensory deprivation. We are also experimenting with aromatherapy, yoga and guided meditation to create relaxation tours. If we create an environment where someone can find enough silence to hear their inner being, they can break through the resistance they feel to truly relaxing. This is a crazy, busy world that is going faster and faster. The modern world’s steady stream of communications has created an overload factor that doesn’t allow us to think! Relaxation spaces, in the embrace of warm water, are perfect check valves to release the pressures in our minds... a private 50 minute treatment can send clients a world away and then bring them back more balanced and refreshed to rejoin the race, stronger and wiser for the experience.”

Sustainability is a word on the lips of many a spa spokesperson, and singular treatments obviously use less water. Mindy Terry: “As the industry moves more and more towards sustainability, saving water is an issue. Unfortunately, it is the consumer who will ultimately determine what works and what doesn’t. Certainly there are exceptions, but at this time, the majority of spa consumers aren’t as concerned with sustainability as we in the industry are. Hopefully, that will change. The larger wet amenity areas are helping to increase consumer awareness and education. We are in the early stages of “awareness development” for water therapies in the U.S. Smaller scale hydrotherapies may still be ahead of their time for the majority of spas, but I believe in the near future that we will experience a Renaissance of sorts with smaller scale therapies. For the time being, we need to focus on methods to make what is working, work more effectively. We should look at ways to reduce spa water consumption through recycling and filtration processes.”

The common thread

So, the consensus is... all over the map. What we must conclude is that there is a place in the world for both the large and gregarious, and the singular and serene. While the word “spa” conjures very different things for different people, water will always be integral to the true spa experience. It is the element from which this entire industry sprung in the days of the ancients, and it looks as though we are coming full circle. In order for us to identify what makes any spa experience generate continued success, however, we need to define what turns a treatment into an experience. Every hydrotherapy treatment takes the body from cleansing into heat to detoxify, and then into rest to cool the body back to normal core temperature. But that

basic process is not what makes it an *experience*. It is not what brings a client back for more. What makes a spa treatment, whatever the size or therapeutic benefit, most *memorable* for the client? Human beings have 5 senses and touch is only one of them. To make the spa experience truly unforgettable, all the senses must be engaged. It begins with the view. For example, a basic steam room is not going to make someone pine to repeat the experience once they are back in Hoboken. But add the scent of eucalyptus; make the room round and womb-like, covered with soothing or rich colors; add elegant tile seating and hidden lights illuminating an inspiring focal point - and she'll be back with 5 of her closest friends in tow.

Back in Tabacon, I partook of an ancient ritual called the Temazcal (from the native Nahuatl words, tema (bath) and calli (house)). It is essentially the sweat lodge, central to Native American cultures that combine the cleansing and detoxifying of the body with the purification of the soul. I sat with my two children, a master shaman and a shaman-in-training as the door was sealed shut and the only light was the glow from the red-hot rocks in the center fire pit. Water and medicinal herbs were thrown onto the rocks to create instant and very intense steam. There was heat, mist, blackness, and a sense of infinity even in this tiny structure - as though we were sitting on the edge of the Earth with all of space in front of us. They say, when you can see nothing, you can see everything. The shaman invoked the Great Spirit of the Earth, and we proceeded to offer prayers and visions for our mothers, our children and our ancestors. In the blackness, we all connected in a way I cannot adequately describe in words, and that experience will stay with me for the rest of my days - not because my body was detoxified or invigorated (which it was), but because the experience touched my heart and soul. It was larger than just my body - it transformed the whole of me. The unforgettable spa experience, large or small, must be a holistic one, and it is the challenge of every spa owner to provide an environment, a special facet to the service- something that is emotional and spiritual as well as physical. Places like Tabacon do this without effort, and we must revere and protect these truly spectacular natural wonders of the world. It is also our job to find a way to sooth the jangled souls that come to the spa, large or small, for this thing that they can't seem to find in their everyday lives - transcendence.