

CRAFTED LODGING

GREAT LAKES BY DESIGN

Lifestyle vernacular

New England meets Southern Colonial in this residence designed by husband-and-wife architects, Rob and Julie Sears of Sears Architects Inc., and built by longtime construction partner Tony Zahn of Zahn Builders Inc.

Hospitality by healthcare

Text: R.J. Weick

“Design is a practical practice. There is a misconception that interior designers come up with creative ideas and make things happen almost magically, but that is not the case at all. A good design is very thoughtful,” said Kathryn Chaplow, interior designer and owner of Kathryn Chaplow LLC in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

“Understanding the end-user is critical to the real success of a space. A really great design takes careful consideration of all the things you don’t see, like good wire management and hidden-but-easily-accessible storage: that is where the real magic is taking place,” Chaplow added.

Kathryn Chaplow LLC is an interior design firm specializing in both residential and commercial markets for new construction and remodel work. Chaplow, a practicing designer of more than 20 years, and her studio team were tapped early on when it came to the Bengtson Center for Aesthetics and Plastic Surgery in Grand Rapids—along with AMDG Architects Inc., First Companies Inc., and Insignia Homes—when longtime clients Dr. Brad Bengtson, MD, FACS, and Anna Bengtson, marketing director, looked to bring an entirely new patient experience concept to envisioned life.

“We have worked together on multiple projects over the past 16 years—both residential and commercial,” Chaplow said. “They have a very clear vision for their patient-focused practice, so I knew what the priorities were and where they would place value and importance.”

Dr. Bengtson, founder and owner of the Bengtson Center for Aesthetics and Plastic Surgery, has been a board-certified plastic surgeon in Michigan for nearly three decades, working in reconstructive surgery early on in his career before deciding to launch his own practice nearly 13 years ago. The medical practice, originally located in



the Women’s Health Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, specializes in aesthetics and plastic surgery, and provides non-surgical solutions for patients, such as Coolsculpting, JUVÉDERM and JUVÉDERM XC, and Latisse, among others. For Dr. Bengtson, who is also an international speaker and educator—and holds more than 10 medical device patents—it is the fine detail and natural result that are central to procedures and treatment.

Since initially relocating to the Women’s Health Center, the practice quickly outgrew its space and sought a new site that would not only accommodate continued staff and patient growth needs, but also consolidate all services and procedures into a single building designed for the patient experience. The consolidation would also offer an opportunity for collaboration among aesthetic, plastic surgery, and non-surgical experts as they treated patients from across Michigan, the United States, Canada, and Europe.

From a leased footprint of about 7,000 square-feet and a staff of about 25 individuals, the practice quickly outgrew its space and more than doubled its staff to more than 60 people. Rather than continue leasing in an area with limited expansion and parking options for patients, Dr. Bengtson connected with Doug Taatjes, CCIM, SIOR, partner and associate broker at NAI Wisins-

ki of West Michigan, during the search for an ideal site: a parcel of land outside of the dense urban core with convenient access to major thoroughways and the Gerald R. Ford International Airport.

“Our business was rapidly expanding, we wanted to bring our surgical center aspect into the same building, we were growing with really exciting and new technologies and techniques very rapidly, and wanted to provide an even more exceptional experience for our patients,” Dr. Bengtson said. “About 15-to-20 percent of our patients are outside a 300-mile radius, so our dream was to facilitate an outstanding experience from the surgical to non-surgical standpoint for our out-of-town patients.”

The envisioned experience sought to reconcile seemingly juxtaposed typologies of a spa-like or hospitality-forward ambiance and state-of-the-art medical and surgical suites. Idea in mind, Dr. Bengtson consulted with national and international physician and plastic surgical colleagues to identify best practices in design and patient flow across the globe.

“I have traveled to all the top plastic surgery, cosmetic surgery centers that had med spas—visiting my friends in Indianapolis, Louisville, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Kansas City, Belgium, Spain, and Stockholm, among others—met and visited with them and then

put together a new vision for a completely concierge practice that is really unlike any plastic surgery practice in the world,” Dr. Bengtson said. “It is a combination of the best of the best from all my colleagues who I would view as having the top plastic surgery practices in the world.”

To help bring this new center to life, Dr. Bengtson turned to Kathryn Chaplow LLC, AMDG Architects, and First Companies to transform the site into an approximately 46,000-square-foot, multi-tenant structure known as the New Vista Medical Office Building. The healthcare facility’s anchor tenant would become the Bengtson Center for Aesthetics and Plastic Surgery, which initially had about an 18,000-square-foot footprint and has since expanded to nearly 24,000 square-feet.

Peter Baldwin, AIA, NCARB, president and principal at AMDG Architects, said from the very beginning, the concept was to instill a sense of welcome and comfort in the patient or guest experience upon initial approach.

“The interesting thing is, the Bengtsons really didn’t want a building that was a cold, contemporary glass box or a pancaked, two-story building with ribbon windows. They wanted it to feel more comfortable like a home—a big home, because it’s a medical building with a lot of suites in it,” Baldwin



said. “I think one of the unique characteristics, or design challenges, is how do you scale up architecture that is generally driven more out of a residential scale?”

There was also the added challenge of the site’s location within an urban zoning ordinance, which meant the building had to be set close to the sidewalk with a street-facing entrance. The architectural team worked with the city to allow for a comfortable setback and to position the entrance away from the street for patient discretion and easy access from the parking lot. The form and massing of the building itself drew upon residential vernacular to create a sense of home, integrating features such as wood trim, natural stone, rustic timber canopy at the entrance, and an exterior style reminiscent of New England.

“We broke down the scale of the main forms, added a stone base, and designed larger details for the exterior in terms of the gables and some of the main trusses. Our trim details are heavier or thicker than you would normally see on a home, because the building is bigger,” Baldwin said. “I think we were quite successful in dealing with the

scale and the architecture and experience on the outside.”

The process also included a number of interior iterations as the collaborative team worked to address organizational and spatial ideas, which as Baldwin noted, were really driven by a central space, a big bay window, and the sense of entry, welcome, and spaciousness.

“At the very same time, we were working three-dimensionally and understanding the character of the space, the flow, and the feel all sewn together; so by the time we were done doing design work together, the majority of the spaces had been vetted and understood at least in terms of the overall spatial character, as well as the physical dimensions, the flow, and layout,” Baldwin said.

In the end, the interior layout welcomes with a grand, hospitality-like entrance complete with concierge desk and is designed with the intuitive workflow in mind. Planning also went into delineating staff and patient spaces; carving out areas for employees while also offering privacy for patients, such as the practice’s surgical wing, which has its own entrance, waiting room, and staff area

provides a degree of discretion. The practice also features consulting areas, exam rooms, a boardroom with integrated technology for educational and live webinars, make-up area, men’s lounge, non-surgical treatment rooms, state-of-the-art surgical suites with pre- and post-operation areas, two surgery rooms, and staff workspace.

“It is really a very comfortable environment. Part of the challenge is by nature a concierge plastic surgery practice is incredibly inefficient. It is much more efficient to walk into a [lobby] with a desk with three people with their heads down working and having all of these separate rooms instead of having big open spaces,” Dr. Bengtson said. “It is much more cost-effective and -efficient to do things that way, but we wanted the exact opposite experience. It’s very easy to say we offer ‘very exceptional patient experiences,’ but it is much more difficult to actually provide that.”

With a goal of carrying the high-end residence look-and-feel of the exterior throughout the interior, the team again relied on the expertise of the Kathryn Chaplow LLC team to help design spaces that facilitated the pa-

tient care experience from the very moment of arrival.

“From the beginning, the patient came first in every discussion we had as a design team. The finishes, the fabrics, and key design elements—like the color palette and fireplace—were designed to make patients feel at home. The space is meant to be calming and reassuring, and that is reinforced by the care team,” Chaplow said.

“The Bengtson Center has a reputation for setting the bar. They set the bar with their innovative approach, their care, their inclusion of men, and their results. I think their vision to create a space like nothing else anyone was seeing in medicine was very exciting from the start. Dr. Bengtson thinks big. It’s a dream for a design team when the client says, ‘let’s design something really different, and let’s do it really well,’” Chaplow added.

Working with Anna Bengtson, Chaplow and her team curated statement finishes, fixtures, and furniture to support the driving interior design vision that held the patient experience central. Upon cursory glance, its main concierge and reception area is more

likely to evoke a residential ambiance, complete with a floating, oval bulkhead above the desk; architectural detailing on the ceiling; a grand bay window; and tiled fireplace. Chaplow noted signature elements, such as blue, glass-beaded wallcoverings, polished nickel hardware, and light fixtures, were selected for their durability and beauty—a combination fitting for a medical environment in which sustainable, low-maintenance options are practical solutions, while also providing the comforts and aesthetics of home.

“If we could not imagine using any of the materials we considered in a residential living room, it did not pass the test. Even the patient care spaces for skin care and treatment all have dimmable lighting, beautiful wallcoverings, and residential accents like modern-framed mirrors and accent seating,” Chaplow said.

“We love how the Bengtsons appreciate quality finishes. They understand how fabrics, wallcoverings, beautiful lighting, fixtures, and artwork elevate a space. They really value design and elevated material use, and their patients love it. Their spaces

feel more like something you would see in a boutique hotel than a medical building,” Chaplow added.

A private waiting room strikes a rich chord with its darker color palette; and make-up and product areas were intentionally designed to look and feel like boutique spaces within the suite. Part of the success in the different spaces was the attention to light and the layout itself, according to Chaplow.

“The layout of the cabinetry and textures used distinguish those areas and make you feel like you are able to spend time in them without being on display to the main reception and lounge areas. That was very intentional. It is all about creating comfort,” Chaplow said. “As important as the actual dimensions is the sense of space created with light and layout.”

The team also approached state-of-the-art medical technology, video conferencing systems, and other heating, lighting, and cooling systems with the same attention to detail and care. Baldwin said a space like the center can “get beat up by technology” or technical and surgical needs, and one of the aspects he is most proud of in the proj-

ect is when looking at the spaces and experiencing the technology, it is highly agile and integrated.

“It is very technology-rich, but it isn’t something that looks like a bad science project. The technology is serving the people and the space rather than vice-versa,” Baldwin said. “If you looked at it, you wouldn’t necessarily think that it is a really agile, savvy, technology-rich space, but it is: it is behind the scenes, subordinate, and that work doesn’t happen without effort and without intention. I think that is an untold story of good design.”

It also translated into more day-to-day technology and hardware in both patient and employee spaces as the team paid careful attention to wire management, outlet locations, and accessible, yet well-hidden storage for staff to create a space that ultimately supported the multi-functionality of the center, while not taking away from the residential or boutique experience. Even before final finishes, the foundation for a more residential atmosphere was arguably established through a collaboration between First Companies, general contractor, and Insignia Homes, a Grand Rapids-based custom home builder who has previously worked with Chaplow and the Bengtsons on other projects.

“Insignia brought a residential level of finish that dovetailed beautifully with the construction First Companies handled,” Chaplow said. “That is a very rare, collaborative effort. Both teams have to be cooperative, organized, and professional to make it work, and it was pretty perfect.”

It was the collaborative spirit throughout the process that was also an enjoyable aspect for Baldwin, who noted the architect’s job is not only to provide vision, but also filter out ideas and leverage those that are brilliant.

“AMDG Architects was deeply grateful for the opportunity to team with the great talent and commitment of First Companies, Kathryn Chaplow and her team, and the energy and vision of the Bengtsons,” Baldwin said.

“We take our gifts and our talents and we serve others. We build excellent environments and lasting relationships. Design, space, architecture: in its essence is an applied art, it is not a pure art. It serves people, it inspires people, it meets their needs, and it actually drives them in their aspirations. It is people-centric and ultimately judged by the user. It still needs to be beautiful, it still needs to inspire, but it needs to be fundamentally rooted in supporting both the needs and aspirations of people,” Baldwin added.

Chaplow also noted working together as a holistic, talented team, and listening and advocating for the client and the end-user are some of the most important design elements to ensure the design-build process supported the best patient experience.

“This was our first big project with AMDG Architects and planning the space with them was an excellent experience. We really love working with their team. They work to research and understand their client first,” Chaplow said.

“Working with clients who trust and value design the way Bengtsons do is a privilege,” Chaplow added.

For Dr. Bengtson, the combination of the building—its physical structure and interior design—the seamless integration of technology, and the staff who provide the care are what make the center so special.

“The beauty of the building, the aesthetics, the non-medical aspects are important, but ultimately it is the staff who provide the care and make the building come alive,” Dr. Bengtson said. “I still pinch myself every day when I go in. It is very natural and proportional with everything we do and I think the reflection of the space and the experience people have to really flow and work together. I believe we do that really well.”