

## HEALTH CARE — DESIGN TRENDS

## 2020 showcases the importance of the right textiles

**A**s health care designers, we often are asked about the durability and cleanability of materials before aesthetics are taken into consideration. If materials in a health care setting cannot be maintained by the Environmental Services team, it can pose a risk to patient safety, as well as the design of the interior being ruined by these failing materials. A highly debated topic is the upholstery used on furniture in public and clinical spaces. Today, fabrics seem like a thing of the past due to their limited cleanability, and many users have adopted durable coated fabrics in all spaces.



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Enter 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic: Our roles as designers are more critical now than ever. Clients value the research we do to ensure that the materials being specified in their buildings will withstand their cleaning regimens. Durability, cleanability and performance

of surfaces have become an essen-



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tial topic in all industries, not just health care. Heavily used furniture within health care facilities, senior housing communities, restaurants and airports is being disinfected more during the pandemic. EVS teams have increased cleaning protocols tremendously. These steps are necessary for decreasing the

spread of the COVID-19 virus. Can we take what we know about the cleanability of textiles in the health care industry and apply that knowledge to furniture used in other building types within our communities?

Durable coated fabrics are textiles that are coated to become nonporous. They include vinyl, polyurethane, thermoplastic elastomers and silicone materials. When these fabrics hit the market just a few years ago, they were marketed as bleach cleanable fabrics and were extensively used in health care facilities. They have since been specified in senior housing communities, restaurants and office workplaces due to their ability to be cleaned. Over time the materials started failing, causing an industrywide problem. Manufacturers and designers soon

came to realize that not all health systems and facilities strictly use bleach to clean their porous and nonporous finishes. There are many different rigorous protocols for EVS teams to follow within a health care setting; not every facility uses the same process. Examples of these issues are delamination of the material, soiling and staining, cracking and puddling. Has this ever occurred in a facility or interior you have visited or work in?

We are more aware in today's environment of the difference between cleaning and disinfecting, however, this may not have been the case prior to the pandemic. Cleaning is defined as the removal of dirt, soil, bodily fluids, etc. Germs are removed by using water or a type of cleaning agent. Disinfecting is defined as inactivation of pathogens. This happens by sterilizing the area that contained the pathogen and destroying it. Products like bleach can accomplish this. Durable coated fabrics need to be able to withstand both cleaning and disinfecting processes. These textiles have had to endure more aggressive cleaning and disinfecting protocols due to the pandemic. A deep clean of each patient room is conducted after every visit, as well as routine cleanings occurring in all public spaces more regularly. Many facilities have removed furniture in waiting rooms or have taped off

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The Infusion Clinic at Cherry Creek Medical Center furniture is all upholstered in durable coated fabrics.

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every other seat for social distancing to occur. Regardless of the social distancing protocols facilities are taking into consideration, the longevity of all interior finishes is crucial. Stronger cleaning agents are being used today with an increased frequency of cleanings. Textiles need to be tested to meet these higher standards and ensure a fail-proof result for the future.

The upholstery industry lacks a universal testing method that focuses on health care specifications.

When these fabrics fail, the durability and cleanability of them are jeopardized, threatening the health and safety of users. Failure of these fabrics can result in the material cracking and exposing the porous cushion beneath, which is difficult to disinfect. Not disinfecting the seating properly can result in the spread of hospital-acquired infections. Time and money will go into replacing failed textiles, causing frustration to the owner. The Chemical Fabrics and Film Association Inc. has introduced a minimum performance standard for contract upholstery used indoors

in health care applications. This next step is going to change the design industry's ability to specify upholstery for end users that will not fail.

We have not yet emerged from the other side of this pandemic, but there are many takeaways that can be applied to our buildings currently in design. Selecting materials that are highly durable and can withstand rigorous cleanings in all industries, having early conversations with EVS teams to understand the cleaning protocols and products they use, and communicating these protocols with interior finish

and fabric manufacturers to ensure materials are tested thoroughly will help create a safer environment for users.

As designers, it is our responsibility to design buildings that not only are aesthetically pleasing, but also are designed with responsible materials to maintain a safe environment, no matter the circumstances. We challenge all our industry partners to examine their materials for cleanability and durability and learn how to continue to provide high-performance materials that will serve the end user well for many years. ▲