



The invitingly contemporary approach to Touch Salons communicates to passersby the tone of the experience to be had there.

Designs on Comfort

At 3 Chicago salons, sharp design is part of the pampering package

By Edward Keegan, AIA

In an increasingly virtual world, where professionals aren't even on vacation when they're in exotic locations supposedly on vacation, it was probably inevitable that we'd see an increasing number of places designed to help urbanites get away, if even for just an hour or so.

Or that would seem to be the best explanation for a proliferation of spas, salons, and other personal aesthetic treatment centers. Chicago's architects have been working on such projects for at least the past few years—even yielding an AIA Design Excellence Award for one at last year's Designlight. We've visited that one and two others to see how the city's architects are helping their clients' clients primp and pamper themselves.

RAISING THE BAR

Touch Salon began as a prototype designed by Mark Cuellar, AIA, and Sylvia Billisics, Assoc. AIA, to be deployed in a series of franchise locations in Chicago and Miami. Its first installation, in the Loft-Right building on Fullerton Avenue, won a 2007 AIA Chicago Interior Architecture Honor Award. A subsequent location in the downtown Aon Center was done by 4240 Architecture, and another by the original designers is planned for South Michigan Avenue.

The owners wanted a mid-range salon with a spa environment. "They wanted it to be a step above your neon-storefront nail salon," says Cuellar. The designers visited local salons for research, but the idea of a bar instigated the prototype.

The client envisioned a high counter with alcohol and other beverages available during treatments. "It would be a communal experience for a bunch of women who get their nails done together," Cuellar says. But since Touch was meant to be a franchise concept, the prospect of individual owners procuring liquor licenses didn't make sense. The designers lowered the worksurface to a more comfortable table height, but kept the linear bar idea that places the manicurists on one side with the clients on the other. This promotes a similar

conversational dynamic to a bar, albeit a little less lubricated.

Cuellar and Billisics make the bar concept central to the entire salon. It's designed as a ribbon that winds through the space, rising to create the reception desk in front, running up the wall at the rear, and angling to become a floating soffit above. The four-inch thick element is clad in a wenge laminate, chosen for its waterproofing and durability.

Illuminating each manicure station is a long tube with an MR16 fixture that punctuates the bar and soffits. Patrons sitting along the bar were initially meant to view televisions along the opposite wall, but that was a victim of value engineering. In its place the designers provided a distinctly more soothing environment by creating a backlit wall of Veritas resin panels with a reeded grass infill pattern.

Pedicure customers view the same calming wall from a heightened perspective. Parallel to the bar, the pedicure stations are configured as a continuous banquette raised six inches above the floor. Once again, the designers were aspiring for something grander than the ordinary. "You typically have big La-Z-Boys," Cuellar says, which although they're "really ugly," are ergonomic and work well for the task at hand (or more precisely, foot).

At Touch, the pedicure area is delineated by a tiled band that mirrors the wood bar and soffits. It's finished in half-inch diameter penny tile discs, and the necessary footbaths are built into the tiled step. One of the bigger challenges was to provide comfortable seating. A banquette doesn't permit the range of adjustment available in the standard chair, so upholstered pillows are provided to allow customers to make themselves comfortable.

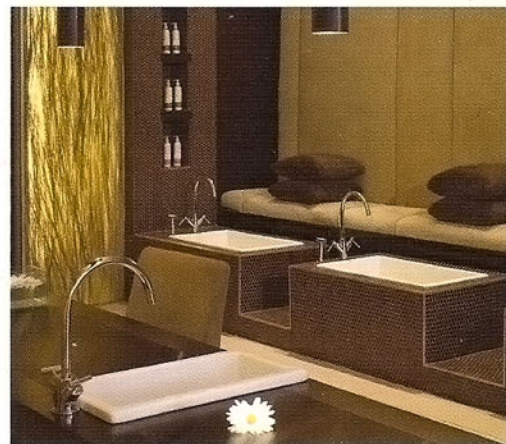
The spa experience, while relaxing, is inevitably transitory and fleeting. The same is sometimes true for design as well. Thus, the award-winning Touch Salon on Fullerton Avenue that opened in November 2006 has already seen the end of its days; a new proprietor changed the name and altered some of its design features.



Dr. Memar: The Store, designed for drama



Sir Spa plays a male game



Touch Salon puts comfort at her feet



Photo by James Steinkamp | Steinkamp Photography

Clubby from the chairs to the ceiling fan, Sir Spa is expressly designed to make men feel at home in a salon—which is not their natural habitat.

A MAN'S MANI

Sir Spa's take on the personal aesthetic treatment facility is a bit unorthodox; it's specifically aimed at a male clientele.

The renovation of the 5,000-square-foot structure in Andersonville—or SOFO, as the real estate agents would call it, since it's a few storefronts south of Foster—was the work of architect David Bradley, AIA. Bradley says he was impressed by the client's preparation. In addition to a business plan, market analysis, and cost estimates, they had a real handle on some architectural nitty gritty. They wanted specific fixtures and minimum dimensions for the spa rooms.

With more savvy clients than usual, Bradley found issues involving accessibility and equal access to be among his biggest challenges. The two-story building needed two stairs and an elevator to pass muster with the accessibility patrol at City Hall. And dealing with women in the facility was even more complex. While geared to male tastes and needs, provisions had to be made for women to use the facilities as well. Thus, a unisex toilet room was provided on each level, and one treatment room on the second floor has a shower that can be used by female customers.

Despite the need to accommodate women, the overall design is intentionally clubby and masculine. Dark walnut is used throughout, and most doors have frosted glass lites that give an old-fashioned look. "The idea was to give it an executive feel," says Bradley. Leaving the rather spare storefront entrance and waiting area, Bradley configured the spaces as a series of transitions that take the client further from the street and away from the hustle and bustle of the real world.

The locker room marks the first change; where patrons peel off their clothing, leave their belongings in key-coded lockers, shower under rain forest fixtures, and put on plush robes and sandals. Bradley set up the sequence so that you enter through a front door and leave through the back that leads to the relaxation lounge deep within the building—as acoustically isolated from the city as possible.

“You start by keeping it simple, using good materials. Complexity doesn't necessarily make for good design.”

Loitering is encouraged. Comfortable chairs separated by sheer curtains, a fridge, mini-bar, music, and provisions for making tea help set the mood. "It's the place where, before you go to the place to relax, you can relax," says Bradley.

If you're receiving multiple treatments, the relaxation lounge serves as a waiting area between

sessions. The individual treatment rooms are minimalist in spirit, and there's no natural light—more ways to tune out the world and ensure privacy.

By contrast, manicures and pedicures are given in an airy second floor space overlooking Clark Street. Club-like lounge furniture can be rearranged as necessary, and a flat screen TV provides appropriate sports programming. "It's like sitting in your living room, getting a manicure," Bradley says.

But one big difference is the nomenclature; it's not manicures and pedicures, it's hand detail and foot detail. "We're catering to guys," says Bradley. "If you put it in car lingo, it's OK."

its affinity with the range of skin tones: "There's black, brown, white, a little yellow—if you look at it closely," Hoffman says. The counters conceal storage for product, separate the browser from the displays just a bit, and create a more traditional retailer/customer experience.

The second function is to use the space for events. "The store is an outreach to get his practice on the street," Hoffman says. This is expressed by the object that embraces the single structural column in the center of the otherwise open space: a bold white workstation made entirely of Corian—countertop, cabinets, and a sink—as if carved from a single block of resin. Sitting on a neutral gray porcelain floor and under an exposed ceiling that's been painted black, this sculptural



At Dr. Memar: The Store, the center-of-store Corian bar is integral to the stagey design, a place where the skin specialist can perform hands-on demos.

SKIN: DEEP

Dr. Memar is well-known for his work as a dermatologist; he's one of the most frequently cited experts in skin care quoted in local media. Dr. Memar: The Store was conceived by Massey Hoffman as more than just a retail space. David Hoffman, principal, describes the facility as a blurring of store and clinic. In fact, it's just the first phase of a larger facility that should be completed in the next year. The 1,200-square-foot Washington Street storefront will be joined by a 7,000-square-foot clinic space on the floor above in the historic Garland Building.

Open since last November, the small store is configured to serve several purposes. First, since it is a store, are the products. These are displayed on suspended 3form shelves along the north and west walls of the space. Individual niches differentiate various types and price ranges of pharmaceutical-grade ointments and creams. (Several hundred dollars isn't unusual for a small tube.)

Hoffman describes the overall space as "lab-like." The display cases are set off by backlit Plexiglas that provides an even light around the room while looking as if the doctor might be reading x-rays on them. In front of the displays are a series of undulating counters clad in quarter-sawn American Ash with cesar stone countertops. Ash was chosen for

piece functions as a bit of theater. A standard examination light caps the effect. Hoffman explains that this feature allows Memar to do demonstrations and consultations with a small audience. "His concept of dermatology is to be proactive, helping people with minor problems before they get big," Hoffman says.

While the retail space feels more like a clinic than a store, the actual clinic upstairs that's slated to open this summer is intended to not feel like a clinic. Large floor-to-ceiling windows that look out to Washington Street and Millennium Park will be trimmed by some of the same ash that's used downstairs. But an epoxy coating on the existing concrete floor and exposed structure and ductwork will give the center a loft-like experience.

The minimalist approach that Massey Hoffman used for both spaces began with Memar's theory of treating people's skin. "It's really reductive," says Hoffman. "He's more apt to tell you what not to put on your skin." This matches well with Hoffman's own design inclinations. "You start by keeping it simple, using good materials," he says. "Complexity doesn't necessarily make for good design." CA

Edward Keegan, AIA, is an architect who complements his practice by writing and teaching about architecture.