

# A Feminist Goes to the Hospital

September 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

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In *A Pattern Language*, Christopher Alexander comments on the idiocy of trying to nurse people to health by locking them up in the land of the sick, but a visit to an actual hospital makes the point more vividly than logical argument ever could. The modern hospital is a place of nightmares, even visiting I cannot manage to spend more than an hour here without beginning to go insane. I cannot imagine how anyone ever escapes.

An island of white in an ocean of green, the modern hospital's landscaping dangles the promise of verdant beauty while its insides are all white sterility. The hallways of identical doors twist and turn around so much that it's impossible to find any room that isn't carefully numbered, even after several attempts to try to discern the building's layout. The muted colors and dreary duplication do not reward such attempts at investigation, or even mere attempts at life.

It seems like the building itself is ill. Odd pieces are blocked off with white sheets, larger ones with completely opaque walls. Bizarre machines with large tubes line the hallways, apparently standing in for broken parts of the building's innards, while workmen wander around attempting to treat the other symptoms.

The rooms themselves are monstrous cells, tiny boxes with doors that stay open and walls that fight any attempts at individuality or privacy. The size makes entertaining guests awkward, while the lack of activities makes loneliness unbearable.

Were the large sign reading "Hospital" to go missing, one might easily mistake the facility as one for torture: men whose clothes have been replaced by dreary gowns slowly wander the halls in dreary stupor, their battered faces making them appear as if they have been badly beaten. They are not permitted to escape.

Were one, under such amazing conditions, to try to mount an attempt at fruitful work, it would quickly fail. Even assuming one was able to muster the energy to focus, the noises through the thin walls and unclosed doors would quickly distract. The beeps and buzzes from the assorted machinery would frustrate to no end. The screeching announcements from the loudspeakers would fast derail any trains of thought. And if one manages to get past all these things, well, it will only be a short while until a nurse or orderly comes to insert another needle or run some other humiliating and invasive task.

And so one simply watches the seconds tick away, as in some odd form of Chinese water torture. Sometimes the pain is made more vivid by the combination

of very real physical discomfort, which incapacity makes difficult to alleviate. Itchiness, dirtiness, and restlessness are the orders of the day, with powerlessness coming in to make sure the others don't escape.

Ostensibly this place is meant to cure things, the unimpeachable knowledge of science and the clean sterility of the building meant to combine to induce health. But, as before in history, the cure may be worse than the disease. [Robert Karen has documented](#) how early concerns about antisepsis led hospitals to keep children far away from their parents. The result, as was plain to anyone paying attention, was severe psychological trauma for the children, who assumed their parents had abandoned them, leading to mental problems that last a lifetime.

While modern hospitals induce problems apparently less severe, they are still problems. Again, the doctors that are supposed to help the patients seem less concerned about the patients as people than bodies, things to be measured and operated upon, puzzles to solve, problems to fix. They do not tell the patient what is being done to them, do not reap the benefits that could be received by engaging them in the search for the solution, but instead only share knowledge when forced by law and precedent, preferring to keep the real details private among the priesthood of doctors and nurses.

[Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English note](#) how well-off women of the pre-feminist era suffered from mysterious symptoms of inactivity, a condition they diagnose as the psychological result of their inactivity and powerlessness; society entrusted them with no responsibility and so their minds collapsed from lack of active use.

While women have made great strides in the years since, for many the problem is still quite real. And laid up in a hospital, with domestic and childrearing tasks undoable, they may find the responsibilities they had fade away, their condition stripped back to that of their afflicted forebearers.

And so patriarchal society and patriarchal medicine combine to strip all vestiges of humanity away. No freedom, no responsibility; no movements, no tasks; no privacy, no thought. The person becomes the body that the doctors treat them as.

Friends and family may try to visit, in an attempt to bring a bit of their outside world into this sterile place, but the awkward situation strains even the best relationships. Friendly conversations become hard when one party is lying in bed moaning, while strained family relationships are stretched further, surfacing their most disgustingly dysfunctional aspects. Family members, whatever else they may accomplish, somehow learn the remarkable skill of knowing just what to do to drive you up the wall. And as the hospital environment (along with the psychological stress of seeing you trapped in it) drives them insane as well, their presence quickly becomes more curse than blessing.

I've never seen an environment so effective at inducing such severe psychological pain. After just an hour, I feel like screaming, tearing, pounding, killing. I go

“out of my mind” and yearn to get out of my body as well, running around in circles, pounding against the floor, with not even exhaustion appearing to cure me.

It needn't be this way, for there is a cure: the joy of life. Sanity can be restored through attempts at music, channeling the fundamental disorder into form and elegance, focusing the energy toward good. Art, especially the art of nature, as Alexander suggested, is likely another cure. But hospitals aren't built for that.

*Bonus:* [Life in the Hospital](#)