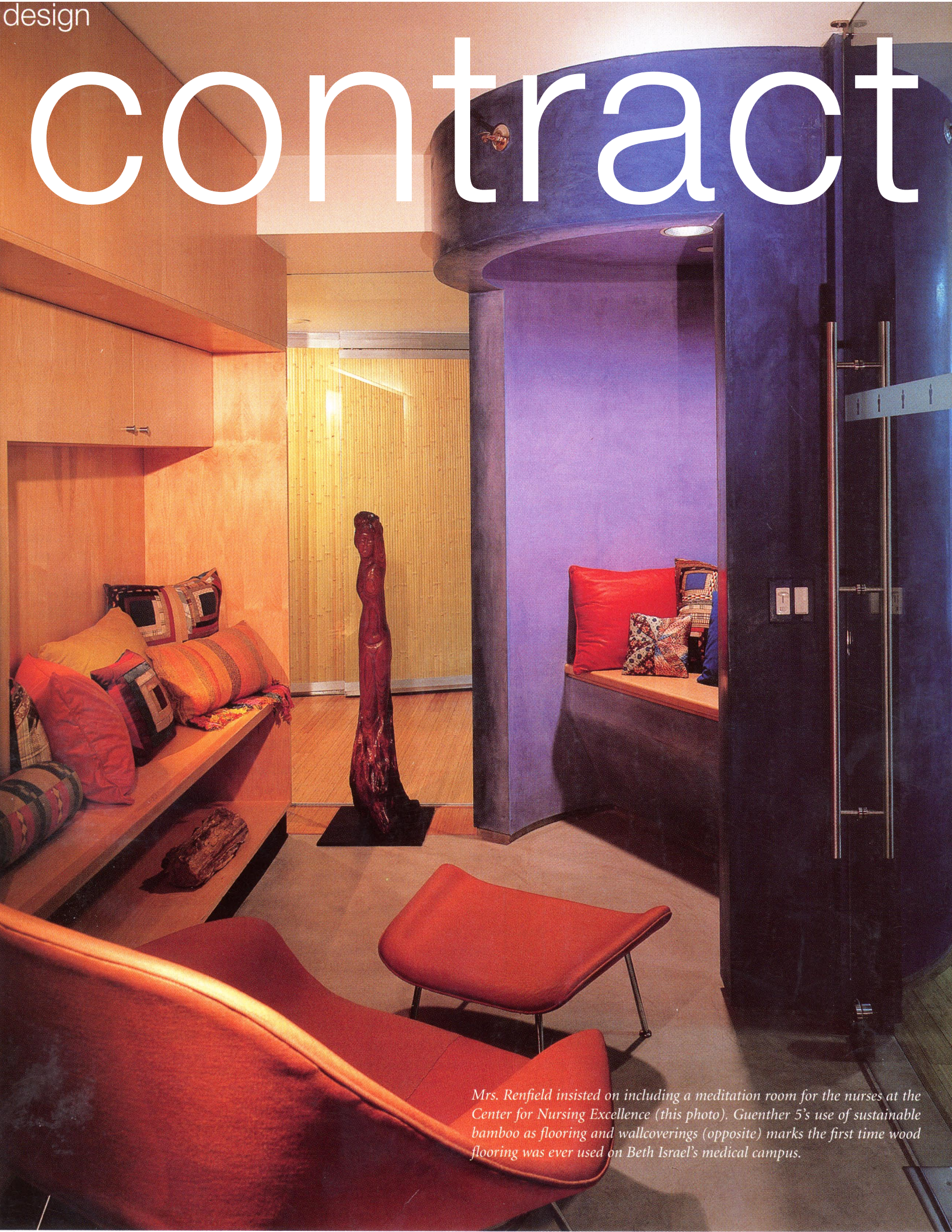


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Mrs. Renfield insisted on including a meditation room for the nurses at the Center for Nursing Excellence (this photo). Guenther 5's use of sustainable bamboo as flooring and wallcoverings (opposite) marks the first time wood flooring was ever used on Beth Israel's medical campus.

Taking Care of the Caretakers

Beatrice Renfield's fondness and deep respect for nurses prompted her to commission New York's Guenther 5 Architects to design a space promoting nursing excellence

By Danine Alati

Often in a healthcare environment the doctors do the exams, diagnose the disease, and prescribe the medication, while it's the nurses who provide the real bedside manner. They are the ones administering treatment, consoling and educating the families, and dealing with patients on a daily basis. These skilled healthcare professionals have the ability to set tone for the hospital stay; yet many facilities do not have appropriate accommodations for nurses. Until recently, Beth Israel Medical Center in New York housed its nursing staff in small basement offices. But the vision of Beatrice Renfield and a design by New York-based Guenther 5 Architects has elevated nurses from their below-grade quarters to the newly renovated 10th floor of the hospital's mid-century Manhattan building, in a space known as the Beatrice Renfield Center for Nursing Excellence.

When her husband had a severe stroke in 1971, doctors said he only had six months to live, but Mrs. Renfield refused to give up. She hired 24-hour nursing care and as a result, he lived for 10 more years. "Mrs. Renfield swore that it was the exceptional nursing care that kept her husband alive for so long," says Kate Maitland, personal assistant to Mrs. Renfield. "That's when she became an advocate for nurses." As the project benefactor, Renfield had definite goals and requirements for the Center. While she sought all the functional aspects, such as an educational facility, a comprehensive library, and computers in a learning center, she also wanted a bright, welcoming place that included nurses' memorabilia and offered a spot for quiet reflection.

Rebecca Guenther, principal and founder of Guenther 5 Architects, says that fitting all the requisite programming into 5,000 sq. ft. posed quite a formidable task. The small footprint (which used to house multiple apartments), coupled with a limited ceiling height and irregular columns dispersed throughout the space, challenged the architects to innovatively fulfill Renfield's wish list. "Mrs. Renfield wanted an identity space," Guenther explains, "so we completely gutted the entire floor." A large, perimeter classroom accommodates educational sessions and seminars, while conference rooms, seminar space, workstation learning centers, and private offices round out the floorplate. And tucked away in a corner stands the real pièce de résistance of the



Center: the curved cove that is the Renewal/Reflection room, offering nurses a place for quiet thought. This crucial element was a main criterion of Renfield, who lent her own personal pillows to furnish the area.

The overall palette of the Center was derived from Renfield's own home in Manhattan, and reflects accents from her Richard Meier-designed house outside the city. "Mrs. Renfield felt strongly about incorporating earth tones, yet wanted powerful, saturated colors, as well," Maitland recalls. The bold red wall behind the reception desk references Mrs. Renfield's private office. Artwork throughout comes directly from the Renfields' personal collection, and the old-school nursing uniforms that decorate the space pay homage to the heritage of the nursing tradition.

A proponent of environmentally sustainable design, Guenther incorporates sustainable building materials whenever possible. In the Renfield Center, she did so with vast windows that afford deep natural light penetration (especially in the flexible reception area), low-VOC paint, and bamboo flooring and wallcoverings. A Feng Shui consultant worked with the design team to ensure that the architecture was balanced and the curves and room placements would work within the structure. Guenther says, "We didn't want to replicate the physical environment of the hospital. We sought to create a more residential setting." Concrete slabs in the ceiling prevented the option of recessed lighting, but Guenther redressed the issue with track and downlighting, which lent a homier feel.

An extremely ambitious woman, Renfield embarked on giving the nurses of Beth Israel a space of their own when she herself was in her early 90s. The Beatrice Renfield Center for Nursing Excellence was set to open in the fall of 2002, but the project was temporarily halted due to the death of Mrs. Renfield, who fell ill in August and never had the opportunity to see the final result (which officially opened in February 2003). But close friends, especially artist and designer Elaine Lustig Cohen, assured that the final color and material selections would match Mrs. Renfield's impeccable style and flair. Guenther reflects, "Mrs. Renfield was an extraordinary person. It was a joy meeting her and helping to give physical form to her idea. I think what we achieved matched her concept of what a space for nurses should embody." ■

