

INNOVATION STATION

Building Smarter, Caring Better

The latest technology and architectural trends are redefining hospital spaces while elevating workflows and the client and pet experience.

BY BECKY GASSER, NCARB, FFCP

Smart technology is everywhere today — smartphones, smartwatches, smart cars, smart homes. Now combine those things with cutting-edge advancements in artificial intelligence, cloud computing, robotics, and the Internet of Things, and the potential seems endless. These technologies have revolutionized how we live, work, and connect.

So, what does “smart” mean for veterinary hospital design? And more importantly, how do we create spaces that embrace innovation without compromising compassionate, personalized care for people and pets?

The Evolution of Reception

Designing veterinary hospitals over the past 15 years, I’ve seen firsthand how technology reshapes architecture. One of the most noticeable changes is in the reception area. It wasn’t long ago that front desks were massive multiperson monoliths dominating the lobby. Receptionists juggled phones, paperwork, scheduling, transactions, and in-person interactions.

Today, technology has streamlined many of those tasks, leading to a more dynamic and welcoming front-of-house experience. For example:



- Mobile point-of-sale systems allow payments to happen anywhere, including inside exam rooms, giving clients privacy and avoiding awkward public billing conversations.
- VoIP (voice over internet protocol) phone systems and call forwarding mean those operations can move to

a quiet back-of-house room or sometimes off-site.

- Online portals and preappointment check-ins reduce paperwork and make the in-hospital arrival process smoother.

With those functions relocated, the reception desk is shrinking. Many are being replaced with greeter kiosks — standing-height stations that are efficient and often mobile. Meanwhile, tablet-holding team members walk out to meet clients and offer a treat or friendly scratch behind the ear to a nervous pet. That’s a much warmer welcome experience compared to the past’s Great Wall of Reception.

A Reimagined Exam Room

Technology has revolutionized the exam room experience just as profoundly as in reception. Traditionally, exam rooms were designed around large computers, fixed workstations, and a narrow range of layout options. The setups often forced veterinarians to turn their backs to clients or face awkward barriers to connection.

Early in my career, my mentor and our firm’s founding partner, Wayne Usiak, taught me a simple but powerful principle: “You should never have to talk to someone’s back.” That philosophy meant keeping equipment placement and sightlines front of mind when designing an exam room.

Today, with mobile devices and AI support, a veterinarian can sit in a chair next to a client, showing radiographs on a tablet. The doctor can crouch on the floor next to a dog and wirelessly cast scans to a wall-mounted monitor, or stand near a perched cat while discussing treatment options, all while artificial intelligence software records and transcribes notes in the background. These notes can then automatically generate client summaries, follow-ups, or prescription instructions.

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This shift also gives clients and pets more flexibility. Without fixed focal points, exam rooms can offer a range of comfort options, such as:

- ▶ Elevated perching shelves for cats
- ▶ Padded floor cushions
- ▶ Built-in raised beds
- ▶ Sliding doors to enclosed outdoor exam patios

Using mobile technology, a veterinarian can follow clients and patients to wherever they feel most comfortable. That simple act of allowing the pet to choose its space demonstrates a deep level of respect and care. Modern tools make it possible.

Tech-Supported Healing Environments

I'm not a veterinarian, so I can't speak to surgical or treatment technologies,

STORY ARCHIVE

Becky Gasser wrote about designing compact veterinary hospitals in the February/March 2026 issue. Read "Small Spaces, Mighty Places" at go.navc.com/tiny-hospitals.

but I am a designer, and I know the environment itself is a powerful tool for healing.

Take natural light, for example. It's well-documented that patients — animal and human alike — heal faster when exposed to daylight. But in critical areas like ICU or recovery, windows and skylights aren't always feasible. That's where circadian lighting systems come in. Imagine smart LED systems that mimic the changing temperature and brightness of sunlight throughout the day. Even without actual windows, animals can experience a natural day-night rhythm.

Cage design has come a long way, too. Where we once had only cold, hard stainless steel or rigid laminate, we now have wellness cages that incorporate built-in lighting, temperature control, ventilation, and power ports. These customizable environments allow team members to adjust settings for each patient's specific medical or emotional needs.

Not every pet heals the same way, and now, we don't have to treat them all the same way either.

Supporting the Staff

We know that healthy, happy teams deliver better care. We also know that burnout is rampant in the veterinary field.

Therefore, designing spaces that support well-being isn't just a nice extra. It's also essential.

One of my clients requested a meditation pod in a new hospital. The futuristic capsule allows users to personalize sound, color, and lighting, creating a calming space for mental decompression. For employees in stressful and emotionally demanding roles, the pod is an incredible way to recharge without leaving the building.

Another hospital was set against a wooded area, so the client asked us to design access points to encourage short nature walks. That request sparked a larger idea: What if we introduced smartwatches and fitness apps to support staff wellness programs? Add in accessible paths and shaded seating, and you've got an entire ecosystem supporting both body and mind.



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Smarter Daily Operations

Beyond smart technology for clients, patients, and staff, smart tech in day-to-day utilities earns its keep. For instance:

- ▶ Smart thermostats learn your team's patterns and preferences, optimizing energy use and keeping the building comfortable without constant adjustment.
- ▶ Inventory control systems track pharmaceuticals and notify team members when supplies run low.
- ▶ Smart locks, cameras, and alarms secure the hospital 24/7.
- ▶ Smart laundry machines detect fabric and soil levels, adjusting automatically and sending notifications when cycles are complete.

Each of those systems manages a task that once demanded human time and attention. Freeing up time means more space for the things that matter: better patient care, stronger team communication, and more meaningful client relationships.

The smartest hospitals of the future won't just be full of cool gadgets. Instead, technology will work quietly in the background, supporting compassionate professionals, empowering personal connections, and creating healthier, happier experiences for everyone who walks through the door. **TMB**