



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CARETEL INNS OF AMERICA

# *The Comforts of Home*

*The Coventry House Inn  
at Caretel, St. Joseph*

*By David R. Miller,  
Associate Editor*

*Few words create images as vivid as the word “home.” By concentrating on the word, one can almost feel the gentle touch of a feather bed, smell the inviting aroma of fresh apple pie or see twilight beams of sunlight as they trace a path through a familiar room.*





**Custom-made cabinetry gives each room a homey feel. Cabinets include a sliding shelf that can be used for meals, allowing institutional over-bed tables to be eliminated.**

As strong as these mental pictures are, they are easily overpowered in an institutional setting. Few things are farther from home than an egg-crate mattress in a hospital room, apple pie served on a metal tray or the harsh reflection of sunlight as it glares off of the Plexiglas window at a nurse's station.

Despite how far from home these things are, they all serve a purpose, especially in an environment that is governed by as many strict codes as a nursing home. Even so, Caretel Inns of America has developed a way to create a "home-like" nursing home environment without compromising the quality care that the codes were designed to ensure. The Coventry House Inn at Caretel is the physical manifestation of an idea that spent years in development.

#### THE CARETEL DIFFERENCE

The Coventry House Inn at Caretel is as much a prototype as it is a working facility. The facility represents a unique approach that Caretel has fine-tuned with years of experience building other nursing homes.

"I felt that the entire approach for elder housing and care was wrong," said Horace D'Angelo, Jr., president of Caretel Inns of America. "Following an institutional model, facilities were viewed as a place where the main job was to take care of sick, old people. It's not that care isn't important, but the first thing that you need to do is build a place where older people would want to live. I found that the right model was a Bed and Breakfast or a boutique hotel, not a hospital. Caretel became a place where people enjoy living and can still

receive the care that they need. That is the essence of the Caretel concept."

Every member of the design/construction team would need to work together to transform D'Angelo's concept into a working facility.

"I have some ideas about buildings, but I am not an architect. I'm good with colors, but I am not an interior designer," said D'Angelo. "My biggest concern was putting the right team together."

D'Angelo needed to use his own inventiveness to assemble the group before the project team's creativity could begin to shine on the jobsite. Interface Architecture and Design went into the project with no nursing home experience, but D'Angelo saw great promise in Interface's residential work, which is one of many specialties of the firm. D'Angelo even convinced L & M



Design, a firm with no commercial experience, to join the team as interior designer.

"This whole team has learned and built along the way," said Carol Leonard, interior designer for L & M Design.

As the team learned and built, one of the biggest challenges fell on Shelton Construction Co., construction manager for the project. Shelton Construction worked closely with Interface to make sure that the innovative design ideas would pass the rigorous codes that govern nursing home construction.

#### BENDING THE RULES

In the popular science fiction film *The Matrix*, the world that most people experience is actually generated by a complex computer program. All physical limitations are simply imposed by a computer code, allowing those who understand the true nature of reality to bend the physical laws that govern the world around them. Much like the characters in *The Matrix*, the project team at Coventry House Inn worked to bend a reality that was enforced by rigid codes, building codes in this case.

Construction codes mandate sophisticated mechanical and electrical systems for nursing homes. The systems installed at Coventry House Inn are complex, even by nursing home standards.

"Our scope of work included all of the special systems, and there were an abundance of those on this job," said Daryl Pendergrass, vice president of Mead and White Electric. "Along with the basic electrical service, there were door access systems, camera systems, nurse call systems, fire alarm systems, sound/intercom systems and a backup generator."

Box-like rooms and corridors have become accepted as a method to simplify the installation of these systems, but this

"mold" is shattered at Coventry House Inn with appealing room shapes and intricate vaulted ceilings. This made for a more attractive appearance, but also complicated the task of squeezing the required systems into place.

"We had to have drawings for all of the ductwork that was going into the ceiling space," said Daniel Shelton, president of Shelton Construction Co. "Once we had that drawing, we gave it to the fire protection contractor and he was responsible for knowing where all of the ductwork was going so that he could put in piping for the automatic sprinkler system. The same drawing is given to the electrical contractor so he can fit all of the lights in."

In addition to the coordination aspect, the electrical system was further complicated by the wood frame construction that was used at Coventry House Inn.

"We used conduit and wire systems like we would with a commercial building, but we did it with wood frame construction like you would use with a house," said Pendergrass. "Running conduit through wood is nothing like

running it through steel studs. Stamped steel studs have holes and channels in them for conduit to go through. With wood studs, we had to drill holes and we couldn't put them too close together, too close to the outside edge of the stud, or too close to either end of the stud. Routing conduit through wood studs is challenging."

Construction codes can add significant costs to nursing home construction, but owners can also save money by adhering to the minimum requirements that are required. For example, the Michigan State Manual of Nursing Homes requires only one toilet for every eight residents and only one bathing unit for every twenty residents. Bathing units can put a sizeable strain on a nursing home construction budget because they must accommodate patients in wheelchairs, as well as those who need assistance with bathing. The Coventry House Inn project team carefully searched for ways to affordably exceed the construction codes in order to preserve the privacy and dignity of the residents. The solution was to put a bath-



**Coventry House Inn defies the trend of designing box-like rooms and corridors to facilitate complex mechanical and electrical installations in nursing homes.**





Each corridor at Coventry House Inn carries a unique theme that was thoughtfully selected to appeal to older people. The Baseball Wing is seen here.

room in every resident's room and to convert the entire bathroom into a bathing unit.

The floor of each bathroom slopes toward a centralized floor drain. Finish materials were selected for suitability in a wet environment, including waterproof epoxy flooring, water resistant drywall, tile and decorative vinyl borders. The rooms are also equipped with a toilet and a pedestal sink that adds an elegant look while easily accommodating patients in wheelchairs. Electrical systems, including the nurse call switch, are all rated for safe use in a wet environment.

"If you are taking a shower, you never have to leave the privacy of your room," said D'Angelo. "You can even have three aids in here helping you. If you have to go to the toilet during your shower, it's not a crisis because the fix-

tures are right here."

By strictly adhering to the applicable codes, Caretel has created a safe environment for patients at Coventry House Inn. To create a true home-like environment, the project team would have to work to reduce the institutional scale of the building.

#### THINKING SMALL

Although the Coventry House Inn includes a variety of complex mechanical and electrical systems, the designers had a very simple goal in mind.

"We want you to feel like you walked into someone's house," said Alan Ediger, senior designer for Interface Architecture and Design, LLC. "We want that scale and that level of detail. We want you to immediately feel warm and comfortable. It ought to slap you right in the face."

The realities of the nursing home environment made this much easier said than done.

"One of the design challenges was dealing with the big hallways," said D'Angelo. "They tend to look like tunnels. You can't just slap wallpaper and pictures on the walls and call it home. The architect and the interior designer worked in combination on the hallways and the result is nothing short of phenomenal."

Fire code regulations require nursing home hallways to be eight feet across with no obstructions, which almost mandates an institutional look. Corridors at Coventry House Inn are actually wider than what is required, but this allowed the architect to include pillars and small walls to create cozy nooks.

"We did more than just widen the





**The Afternoon Tea Wing at Coventry House Inn includes an aviary where residents can sit and be entertained by the constant activity of fluttering finches.**

hallways,” said Randall Myers, AIA. “We created points of interest and gathering places.”

Spindle-back benches were placed into some of the hallway nooks. Unstable benches could cause problems if they shifted position as an elderly patient was sitting down or standing up, but the bottoms of the benches at the Coventry House Inn are discreetly attached directly to the baseboards of the walls to ensure stability. The fixed position of the benches also prevents them from being moved into positions where they would obstruct the legally mandated eight-foot corridor width.

In addition to providing places to rest, the benches serve as vantage points from which residents can appreciate the careful attention that went into designing the hallways. Each corridor at the Coventry House Inn carries a unique theme that was thoughtfully selected to appeal to older people. The themes are more than mere window dressing. Since each wing has the same floor layout, the themes are actually a valuable wayfinding tool for patients and staff alike. Themes for the newest additions

to the Coventry House Inn include Baseball and Afternoon Tea, but the most unique corridor features items from Gillespie’s Pharmacy.

Nursing home residents who may not remember a recent conversation can often reminisce for hours about something that happened 40 years ago. Gillespie’s Pharmacy has been a well-known fixture in the St. Joseph area for years, and the items donated by the Gillespie family should bring back countless fond memories. Special display cases were built to house original menus from the soda fountain, ice cream dishes and other donated items. Antique Gillespie’s Pharmacy medicine bottles are also displayed. The medicines were removed for safety reasons but faint aromas, and the memories that go with them, remain.

Similar attention to detail was used to give each corridor a unique feel. The Afternoon Tea Wing even includes an aviary where residents can sit and be entertained by the constant activity of fluttering finches. Patient rooms in each corridor were decorated individually. Although the process was time-consuming



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**This dining room features a vaulted ceiling and French doors that open out onto an enclosed porch. Residents can also reserve a private dining room for small gatherings.**

ing, the end result was worthwhile.

"It seemed like such a large scale to us," said Carol Leonard, interior designer for L & M Design. "We are used to doing residential work, so we broke everything down and looked at every single room like we were doing someone's home."

After coming up with ideas, the interior designers created a notebook with a page for every room in the facility. Armed with this, they could shop for the unique items that would make each room feel like home. To fill out the hallways and individual rooms, L & M Design traveled from Chicago to Shishewana.

The unique items that were acquired by L & M Design would lose much of their appeal if they were placed in a typical healthcare environment. Rooms at Coventry House Inn feature custom-made cabinetry. The design team added a sliding shelf that can be used for meals, allowing institutional over-bed tables to be eliminated. Knotty pine was selected to give the cabinetry a warm, homey feel.

"We don't get a lot of orders for pine these days," said Robert J. Flood, vice president of MFL Design and Fabrication. "Pine is a harder wood to work with because it has a lot of pitch in it and that can clog up your tooling. The knots can also be a challenge if you hit them with your tools."

While custom-built cabinetry can add to the cost of a project, Flood was quick to point out some of the benefits over buying off the shelf.

"Custom built cabinetry gives the designers exactly what they want with better quality and it is usually more durable because thicker, heavier material is used," he said. "Off the shelf cabinetry can also slow down a job because any part that is missing can take months to get if it comes from half a continent away."

Any visitor at Coventry House Inn will notice the great care that was taken to create a homey look while decorating and furnishing the facility. Other steps that were taken to avoid an institutional look are much subtler.

Food at the facility is prepared in a centralized kitchen and then transported to several serving kitchens. All meals at Coventry House are served restaurant style on plates instead of trays. No more than 28 residents are seated in each dining room. The dining room in the latest Coventry House Inn addition features French doors that open out onto an enclosed porch and a vaulted ceiling. Residents can even reserve the facility's private dining room to share a meal with family or friends.

Despite everything that is included at Coventry House Inn, the facility is just as remarkable for what is missing. Corner protectors that are commonly

used in healthcare settings to protect finishes were not used because they create an institutional look. Tile or linoleum flooring was rejected for the same reason in favor of carpeting. Even though the carpeting is treated to resist stains, the decision to create a home-like environment does lead to a trade off in increased maintenance costs. In the same way that Caretel refused to compromise a home-like environment, the company also would not compromise the quality of care at Coventry House Inn.

#### THE CARE IN CARETEL

Coventry House Inn may look just like home, but the design includes high-tech systems that allow the staff to provide a superior level of care for residents. Equipment at the facility is designed to allow healthcare professionals to respond to emergencies quickly. Closed circuit systems allow nurses to monitor hallways and outside areas, but most of these systems are carefully hidden to preserve the home-like feel. Just how well the safety systems should be hidden was a controversial topic.

"I think that some of these things make people feel more comfortable," said Ediger. "A family will come in, see the exit sign and know that things are being taken care of. Knowing how much to hide was a challenge and there were some differences of opinion."

The mixture of visible and hidden safety systems that were installed at Coventry House Inn provide a good balance of aesthetics and peace of mind while complying with all of the applicable codes. Of course, no monitoring system has ever saved a life by itself. The facility layout was carefully considered to allow nurses easy access to areas where problems are likely to occur. Since the living room is one of the most popular gathering spots at Coventry House Inn, it is located just a few steps away from the high-tech welcome center, which would be called a nurse's station in another facility. The welcome center features a curved wood counter and inviting wall coverings to effectively blend in with the living room décor.

The staff at Coventry House Inn is highly qualified, but even with video monitors they can not watch everything at once. Many safety systems were incorporated into the facility to keep





**The facility layout was carefully considered to allow nurses easy access to areas where problems are most likely to occur. Nurses at the high-tech welcome center (below) can keep an eye on residents in the living room (above).**

unsupervised residents safe. Each wing at Coventry House Inn wraps around an exterior courtyard. Access codes are needed to enter this area, but even if residents defeat this safeguard somehow, they should still be prevented from wandering away from the facility. Exterior porches feature high rails that are attractive, but also provide a difficult obstacle to climb over.

"A lot of elopement takes place because when people look outside, they want to go outside," said D'Angelo. "Stopping them from looking outside is the wrong answer. We let them go outside. They can wander out and they wander back in. With all of the windows that we have here, we can keep an eye out and go and bring them in if we need to."

Although Coventry House Inn emphasizes a home-like environment, it is a temporary destination for some







**This unique occupational therapy room resembles a furnished apartment. Patients can practice the everyday tasks that are simple for most adults, but can be daunting challenges for patients recovering from injuries or strokes.**

patients. The new wing of the facility houses a well-equipped physical therapy room and a unique occupational therapy room that resembles a furnished apartment. Patients can practice everyday tasks like getting out of bed or setting the table. These are simple activities for most adults, but they can be daunting challenges for patients recovering from injuries or strokes. After a lot of hard work, patients who use the therapy rooms to their full potential may be able to return home. Granting patients with the right to choose for themselves is a cornerstone of the Caretel philosophy.

The most popular rooms at

Coventry House Inn are the single bed suites, but Caretel included several double bed suites to meet Medicare guidelines. Caretel went to great lengths to give these rooms a homey

feel that is similar to other rooms at the facility. The cabinetry is still custom made and a unique pocket wall was built into each room to hide the privacy curtain when it is not in use. D'Angelo insisted that the design team look for creative ways to keep costs down so that Coventry House Inn would be an affordable option for almost everyone. The end result of these efforts is easy to appreciate.

"It is nice to give people choices," said D'Angelo. "We are not just catering to one select group of people; almost everybody has a choice to live in a nice place. I feel pretty good about that." ❖

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