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# SPACES *that care*, reimagining interior design for mental wellbeing



*Inside two Gold Coast mental health facilities designed to care for young people and the clinicians who support them.*

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There is a moment, often overlooked in healthcare design, when a young person walks through a door and decides – before a clinician has said a single word – whether this place is safe.

*That moment is not incidental. It is designed.*

Research has established what intuition long suggested: natural light and colour selection can calm anxiety, spatial autonomy restores agency, familiar materials lower cortisol.

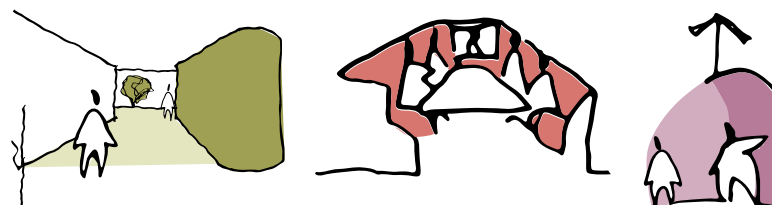
For young people navigating mental health, these environmental qualities are not a backdrop to care, they are active contributors to it.

Archipelago's work on two facilities for Gold Coast Hospital and Health Service – Head to Health Kids (H2HK) in Nerang

and the Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS) at Proxima in Southport, tested these principles in practice.

Together, these projects represent a new design discipline for the practice and a deliberate move toward integrated interior architecture within primary healthcare.

The results show what becomes possible when evidence-based design, cultural depth and genuine clinical partnership come together.





Health and Mental Health facility design has, for decades, defaulted to risk management as its organising logic. The result is familiar: fluorescent lighting, harsh surfaces, institutional colour palettes, and long, confusing corridors. Physical safety has been and should always be at the forefront of designing for mental health.

But what about emotional and cultural safety?

The challenge is real: environments must meet strict clinical compliance, manage risk, and withstand high-frequency use. But for young people already navigating heightened vulnerability, a space that signals as institutional can intensify distress before care even begins.

And for clinicians working in high-pressure conditions, environments that lack warmth or legibility accelerate burnout and intensify vicarious trauma and emotional load.

The opportunity for both the CYMHS and H2HK projects was to hold both imperatives at once: clinical rigour and design for genuine emotional support. Spaces that protect without constraining. That guide without overwhelming. That comply and, in doing so, also care.



*SPACES that care:* Reimagining Interior Design for Mental Wellbeing



### *the projects*

#### **H**ead to Health Kids, Nerang - Children under 12

A 450sqm warm-shell fitout, H2HK delivered specialised mental health support for young children and their families.

The existing tenancy space presented significant design challenges that were addressed through careful planning, legible sequences and fine-grained sensory control.

The layout was sculpted to ease the experience of navigating through the spaces through materiality, colours, curves and maximising opportunities for natural light. Glazed openings at corridor ends serve as orientation anchors and mood regulators simultaneously.

Colour is a key tool in shaping the spaces; shared areas lean into natural greens and earthy tones echoing the surrounding hinterland, while brighter accents and client-selected artwork introduce joy without tipping into sensory overload. Therapy rooms shift to warmer sand tones and gentle yellows with soft, controllable lighting - a carefully calibrated invitation to settle into therapeutic sessions.

Movement from play to therapy follows short, legible transitions that modulate sensory intensity progressively, so children arrive at their session already gently prepared, not startled into it.



## CYMHS Proxima, Gold Coast – Adolescents and Young Adults

A 1,400sqm cold-shell fitout, CYMHS Proxima is a purpose-built setting for multidisciplinary child and adolescent care.

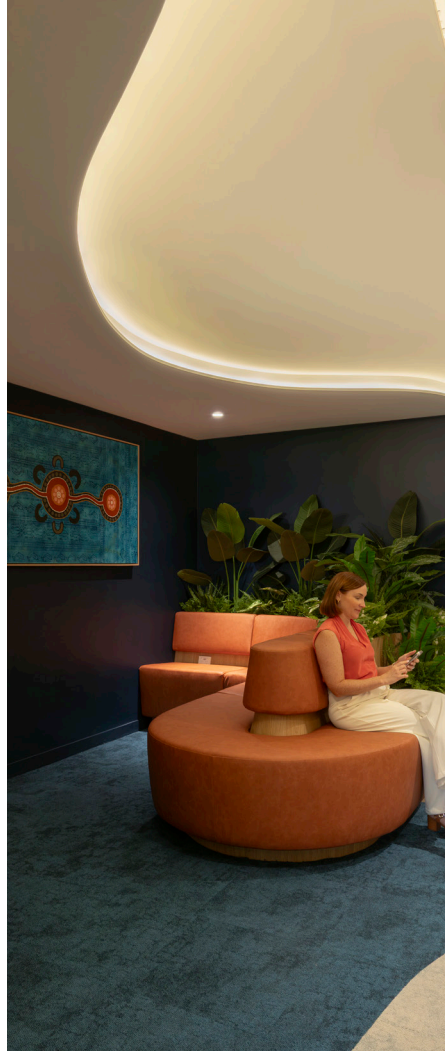
The service model's priorities shaped every spatial decision: reduce stigma, improve access, strengthen clinical practice.

Waiting is rarely comfortable in a mental health setting. At Proxima, young people are given genuine agency from the moment they arrive: larger open areas for those who arrive with family or prefer company; quieter, more secluded corners for those who need a moment before their session.

This is not simply good hospitality – it is therapeutic infrastructure.

Full-height glazing fills corridors and clinical areas with natural light. Therapy rooms carry distinct colour palettes – each with its own calm identity – allowing clinicians and clients to choose the environment that feels right for the session.

A palette of colours drawn from desaturated, natural hues while gentle curves throughout eliminate blind spots, open sightlines and support safe and comfortable movement.



Across both projects, four strategies proved particularly decisive.

## 1

### Light as a clinical resource.

Light is more than a simple utility. Each project uses natural and artificial lighting to support orientation, emotional regulation and therapeutic engagement. The layouts are designed to maximise access to natural day light in shared spaces and “borrow” light from corridor spaces into clinical rooms.

Artificial lighting layers warm tones, and dimmers and colour-changing fixtures give clinicians and clients control to change the space to suit their therapeutic needs. When light can be shaped rather than endured, behaviour settles, stress reduces and therapeutic work becomes easier to enter into.

In staff work zones, natural daylight was democratised - no work zone, staff or clinician was left without access to natural light or external views.

## 2

### Acoustics as care and safety.

Sound can shift a young person’s emotional state within a moment.

Strategies to achieve both acoustic attenuation and acoustic comfort were applied to ensure spaces felt safe, private and calm. Acoustic privacy; achieved through careful wall construction, door seals, and strategic spatial planning is the foundation of therapeutic trust.

Acoustic wall panelling and material selection was key to managing acoustic reverberation and ensuring the acoustic qualities of rooms support therapeutic and workspace activities.

In addition to acoustic treatment, the provision of low-stimulation rooms for young people and quiet pods for staff, offer places to step away from noise and stimulation entirely to regulate emotions.





### 3

#### Nature, colour and form as therapeutic tools.

Colour, materials, planting and art are not finishes; they are the structure to the design of the therapeutic environment. Views to sky and landscape, access to natural light and layered references to nature keep young people and staff oriented to the world beyond the clinic. That connection is not solely decorative; it directly supports engagement in care.

Materials and colours are chosen to reinforce this link to nature and to create environments that feel both calm and joyful.

Soft curves and organic shapes are applied structurally, to ease navigation through corridors and rooms, and decoratively, to visually soften the environment and embed the design in its local context and narrative.

### 4

#### Staff wellbeing, treated as patient care.

Caring for clinicians and staff is inseparable from caring for the young people this facility serves. It's more than designing therapeutic rooms that support clinical practice; the entire environment must strengthen staff safety, wellbeing and productivity.

When staff feel supported, protected and able to work effectively, the quality and consistency of care delivered to young people improves.

Logical back of house circulation reduces unnecessary crossover with public areas, improves operational clarity and provides secure, predictable movement routes for staff.



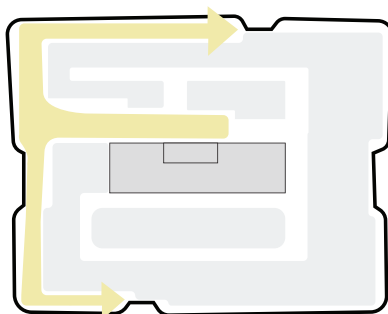
Work settings are deliberately varied to support different modes of practice - focused work, cross disciplinary collaboration, informal connection and emotional decompression.

Staff areas receive the same quality of natural light, material warmth and acoustic comfort as client spaces.

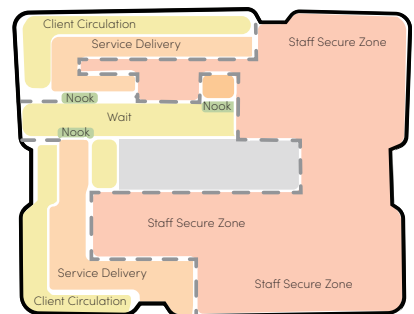
These environments are designed not only to enable staff to perform their work well, but to sustain their emotional resilience over time.

### Macro design strategy diagrams

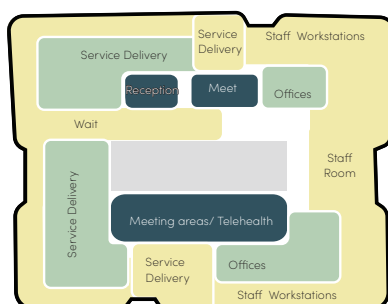
**CLIENT CIRCULATION + FLOW**



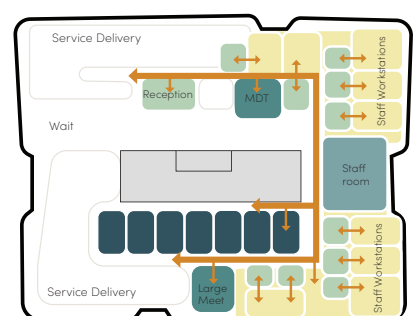
**SECURITY & SAFETY**



**BALANCE NATURAL LIGHT + PRIVACY**



**TEAMS AND WORKPLACE FLOW**





## What Comes Next

These two facilities are proof of concept. They demonstrate that clinical compliance and genuine therapeutic intent are not mutually exclusive, they are equally prioritised.

As mental health infrastructure expands across Queensland and Australia, accelerated by sustained policy investment and growing demand, the opportunity to embed these principles from the outset has never been greater.

The cost of getting it wrong is measured not just in aesthetics, but in clinical outcomes, staff retention and the willingness of young people to return.

For Archipelago, this work represents both a capability and a commitment. We are actively growing our healthcare interior practice, bringing the same integrated design approach to primary health environments where human wellbeing is the brief.

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