

DESIGNED^{to} CONNECT

How well-designed optical spaces and experiences foster confidence, comfort and connection for eye care patients.

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Warm furnishings create a welcoming feel at Sphere Optometry in Calgary.

As the optical industry and retail landscape continue to evolve, patients are increasingly seeking in-person experiences that foster connection, comfort and confidence rather than spaces that feel overly clinical or sterile.

Today, patients place as much value on how a retail environment makes them feel as the products and services it provides. For optical retailers, that means balancing two distinct worlds: healthcare and retail.

“Blending these two elements cohesively can be a challenge,” says Dr. Danielle Gordon, optometrist and owner of Sphere Optometry, a full-scope, purpose-driven clinic and optical shop in southeast Calgary that focuses on kindness, connection, ocular and holistic wellness and giving back to the community. Yet patients are often open to having their expectations exceeded through thoughtful physical and experiential design.

“Beautiful design doesn’t replace clinical excellence,” says Dr. Gordon. “Rather, the way an environment is designed becomes a cue for the quality of care patients expect.”

Today’s optical spaces must strike a balance between thoughtful design and a carefully considered patient experience. Together, these elements build the trust, comfort and human connection that encourage patients to return again and again.

STARTING WITH THE PATIENT AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Thoughtful design always begins with the patient journey. How do patients feel while they're in your space? What experience do they have from the moment they walk through the door until they leave with their purchase?

At Specsavers, Tiffany Ko, Head of Store Development, works with store partners by considering every step of that journey, from the moment someone notices the store to the eye exam, frame selection and final collection.

"We ask, 'How can we make each step feel intuitive, welcoming and effortless?' Ultimately, good design removes friction, builds confidence and allows patients to focus on their eye health."

Successful optical design is no longer simply about displaying product. It is about creating an environment that reflects the quality of care patients receive. The space itself helps build trust and ensures patients feel comfortable, valued and cared for throughout their visit, explains Ko.

This approach to the patient experience mirrors luxury hospitality, where service is viewed not as a single interaction, but as an ongoing relationship.

Bill Gerber, CEO of OMG Optical Marketing Group, believes optical retailers can elevate that relationship by thoughtfully curating every touchpoint before, during and after the visit. Drawing on his expertise in optical merchandising and display design, Gerber collaborates with clients, teams and creative partners to create retail environments that strengthen human connection. His work ranges from complete practice designs to bespoke feature areas.

Gerber describes the patient journey in three stages: pre-visit engagement, in-practice hospitality and post-visit continuity.

Pre-visit engagement can include digital style questionnaires that allow opticians to prepare a personalized consultation, selecting a private tray of frames in advance and transforming a routine shopping trip into a curated styling appointment.

In-practice hospitality replaces a standard reception check-in with a more personal welcome. Refreshments, comfortable lounge areas and dedicated styling alcoves create a VIP-like shopping experience that helps patients feel relaxed and valued.

Post-visit continuity extends the relationship beyond the standard "Your glasses are ready for pickup" notification. Practices can follow up to check on visual



Sphere Optometry's living green wall creates a distinctive eyewear display.

comfort, offer seasonal styling suggestions or provide complimentary frame adjustments and maintenance.

Together, these touchpoints reassure patients that they are valued throughout every stage of their journey. More importantly, they create meaningful opportunities for connection, encouraging patients to return not only for future eyewear needs but for the experience itself.

ELEMENTS OF STRONG DESIGN

The physical design of an optical clinic sets the tone for the patient experience. More than simply creating an attractive



A warm wood reception desk adds a welcoming touch to Specsavers' clean, contemporary interior.



Clear sightlines and open displays create an intuitive shopping experience at Specsavers.



Yorkville Eye Institute's hospitality-inspired space creates natural opportunities for conversation and connection.



Statement eyewear displays and comfortable seating bring warmth and character to Yorkville Eye Institute.

environment, thoughtful design builds comfort, trust and confidence. Here are five design elements optical practice owners should consider.

1 Curated Optical Displays

"When it comes to optical store design, the display needs to be a seamless extension of the overall practice," explains Bill Gerber. It should never feel like an afterthought.

Instead, the design of the space, the atmosphere and the product presentation should work together. Once that harmony is achieved, brand visibility becomes the next priority. Eyewear brands should be clearly visible from outside the practice, while interior displays reinforce the overall offering without overwhelming the space.

Displays should anchor the clinic, supporting both product presentation and brand messaging. Too much emphasis on branding alone, however, can create a disjointed environment. Balance is essential.

2 Lighting and Friction-Free Access

Exceptional lighting elevates eyewear, making frames instantly more inviting. But according to Bill Gerber, great retail design goes beyond appearance.

"Remove physical barriers that allow patients to touch, try on and connect with product immediately," he says.

This open-sell approach, inspired by high-end beauty boutiques and luxury retail, encourages tactile exploration. When patients can handle and experience products without hesitation, comfort, enjoyment and trust naturally increase.

3 Accessibility and Inclusivity

An optical space should be welcoming and easy to navigate for people of all ages and abilities. When design removes barriers and creates ease for everyone, patients can focus on their eye care experience rather than the environment around them.

At Specsavers, one example is the seated dispensing area, which offers greater comfort, accessibility and a more personalized experience.

4 Spaces that Encourage Connection

At Yorkville Eye Institute, Dr. Shalu Pal introduced a coffee bar at the centre of the gallery where patients can enjoy a beverage, have their glasses adjusted or simply charge their phone.

"It has become a natural gathering space that encourages conversations and connection rather than simply waiting for an appointment," she explains.

When areas within a clinic feel welcoming, patients naturally spend more time browsing and interacting with the space. The experience shifts from a routine retail transaction to one that feels relaxed, effortless and enjoyable.

5 Engaging All Five Senses

Because visiting an eye care practice can be stressful for some patients, Dr. Danielle Gordon believes the environment should create a sense of ease by thoughtfully engaging all five senses.

At Sphere Optometry, the space is designed to feel more like a welcoming living room than a traditional clinic. Comfortable furnishings appeal to sight and touch, carefully selected music sets the mood, subtle aromatherapy creates a calming atmosphere and coffee and other beverages encourage patients to slow down and relax.

Dr. Gordon encourages practice owners to continually evaluate how each of the five senses interacts with their space.

"Always ask, 'How do my senses engage with this space?' If the answer isn't what you want, that part of the environment may need to be re-evaluated."

THE TWO 'H' FACTORS: HUMANS AND HOSPITALITY

Regardless of how beautifully a clinic is designed, its greatest impact comes from the people who work there. The team often shapes the patient experience as much as the physical environment.

"When hiring, my primary focus is finding individuals who are genuinely kind, compassionate and truly care about helping others," says Dr. Shalu Pal. "Skills can be taught, but caring cannot. Once we have the right people, we provide them with the knowledge, training and confidence they need to deliver an exceptional patient experience."

This reflects a broader shift toward more human-centred healthcare environments.

"Rather than separating clinical care from retail, many practices are creating environments that feel more like wellness destinations than sterile medical offices," says Dr. Gordon. "They recognize that exceptional patient experiences are built through honest communication, education, hospitality and thoughtful design."

At Sphere Optometry, Dr. Gordon's team intentionally avoids creating a rushed or transactional atmosphere. Instead, every interaction is built around conversation, education and collaboration.

The focus extends beyond vision correction to understanding how patients live.

"During the examination we spend time understanding not only what patients see, but how they live," she explains. "Their work, hobbies, family life, personal style and daily visual challenges all influence the recommendations we make."

Patients leave with a clearer understanding of their visual needs and the confidence that the team is there to support them.

For Pierre Bourre, founder of Lumiere Advisors, a consulting practice specializing in market intelligence, business strategy and



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consumer experience within the eyewear industry, hospitality is at the heart of exceptional optical retail.

He believes every memorable patient experience begins with three essential elements: Mindset, Welcome and Environment.

"Mindset means treating people as consumers discovering something to wear, not simply patients with a problem to fix.

The welcome is a short, consistent ritual every time someone walks through the door, whether they're a first-time visitor or a long-time patient.

The environment is a dispensary that is thoughtfully orchestrated, memorable and capable of telling its own story before the eye exam even begins."

When working with optical practices, Bourre follows what he calls the AEEA approach: Audit, Evaluate, Enhance and Apply.

The process begins by auditing the patient's real-world experience. Too often, he finds practices have become clinical and inward-looking rather than centred on the person sitting in the chair.

From there, the focus shifts to strengthening mindset, welcome and environment. Rather than giving staff a scripted approach, Bourre encourages them to develop a way of thinking that feels authentic and natural.

Ultimately, he believes every practice should ask one simple question:

"Is it about you, or is it about the consumer?"

When the right mindset, a welcoming atmosphere, a thoughtfully designed environment and a clear purpose come together, the gap between a clinical visit and a memorable retail experience begins to disappear.

Dr. Danielle Gordon believes this philosophy reflects one of healthcare's greatest opportunities.



Urban Optics, an OMG client, reimagines the classic library for eyewear.

"Patients are people first. Technology will continue to improve, diagnostics will become more sophisticated and treatments will continue to advance. Those things are all incredibly important. But the spaces people return to and rave about, are often the ones where they feel genuinely cared for. Excellent healthcare and meaningful human connection belong together."

Ultimately, memorable optical practices are shaped by far more than beautiful interiors. They combine thoughtful design, genuine hospitality and meaningful human connection to create experiences patients remember long after they leave. When every interaction reflects that philosophy, great design becomes more than something patients see. It becomes something they feel. **OP**