Primming the Pump: Lactation Room Design Guidelines

Companies with well-furnished mother’s rooms can empower new parents to care for their family without sacrificing career goals.

By MURRYE BERNARD
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For new mothers returning to their jobs, breastfeeding is a loaded topic. If they decide to do it, they must also figure out the logistics to make it work—while they work. Women comprise nearly half of the U.S. labor workforce and, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2016 Breastfeeding Report Card, more than 80 percent of mothers attempt to nurse their newborns. For infants to reap the most health benefits, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends mothers aim to breastfeed for at least one year. In the United States, the lack of a national parental-leave law means many women are often back to work within 12 weeks of giving birth.

“If you are wondering why women who have little babies look like they haven’t slept, it’s because they haven’t,” says Liz York, FAIA, chief sustainability officer of the CDC, in Atlanta. York, a mother of three, has also authored several articles on best practices for lactation room design for the AIA.

Dedicated lactation rooms, also referred to as nursing or mother’s rooms, should be comfortable, private, and accessible environments that enable employees to pump two or three times in an eight-hour day. The facility should also have provisions for refrigerating and storing milk and washing bottles and other pumping equipment.
**Regulations and the Lack Thereof**

Lactation rooms are not required by building codes; rather, they are regulated by labor codes or health and safety codes. The 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) amended the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 to include the "Break Time for Nursing Mothers Provision," which requires companies with more than 50 employees to provide new mothers adequate spaces in which to pump, described as “other than a bathroom, that is shielded from view and free from intrusion from co-workers and the public.” It does not provide more specific design guidelines or requirements.

Last year, the board of supervisors in San Francisco passed the Lactation in the Workplace Ordinance, which went into effect at the beginning of 2018, making it one of the first cities to require the inclusion of lactation rooms and to provide technical specifications and design recommendations. This landmark legislation may serve as a model for future code amendments.

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**Best Practices for Lactation Room Design**

While breastfeeding has made a comeback among mothers in recent decades, “it’s still off the radar screen for far too many people,” says Kathryn Anthony, a professor at the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “I often come across individuals who are surprised to learn that nursing mothers need to pump even when their child is not with them.”

While many employers do have good intentions, they aren’t necessarily versed on the needs of new mothers. Despite ACA regulations and the availability of design guidelines,
some companies still cut corners by designating closets, shower stalls, and single-stall bathrooms as lactation rooms. “Why not ask your boss, ‘How would you like to eat your lunch while sitting on the toilet?’” Anthony suggests for a response.

Though her boss at the CDC supported her decision to pump with her first child, to do so, York had to walk uphill, take an elevator, and traverse a series of catwalks to reach the designated space. Subsequently, when York gave birth to twins, she sought a more conveniently located alternative: a telecommunications closet. Though she always placed a note on outside of the door, a maintenance worker once barged in mid-session.

“I said to myself, ‘Women who are coming back to work have so little bandwidth that they cannot advocate for themselves,’ ” York recalls. She promised herself that she would become that advocate. In 2006, she submitted lactation room guidelines as an AIA Best Practice article, which she has since updated several times.

Based on census figures, among other factors, York’s AIA Best Practice guide suggests one room per 100 female employees. A 50-square-foot room can meet accessibility guidelines if it accommodates a 5-foot turning radius. Minimum amenities include a tabletop, chair, sink, and refrigerator. The tabletop or working surface should be at least 24 inches deep to accommodate bottles, pumping equipment, and laptops—many women continue to work while pumping. While some might assume that a cushy lounge chair is desirable, a supportive and adjustable task chair with casters is better. Other lactation room essentials include electrical outlets for the pump and laptop, a microwave for sterilizing pump equipment, a deep sink for washing bottles and pump parts, and a refrigerator for milk storage. Under-counter fridges can help to conserve floor space, but they must be situated as to not encroach on knee space beneath work areas.

Architects should specify a separate thermostat for the room to maintain a comfortable temperature for occupants. Lactation rooms should also be well lit, with uniform
ambient lighting as well as task lights above the sink and work area. If the room has windows, they should be fitted with shades or opaque glass.

Acoustics are another important factor. Electric breast pumps can be noisy. Full-height partitions with sufficient insulation and a minimum STC (sound transmission class) rating of 45 can help attenuate the volume. Carpet tile floors and fabric wall panels also help to reduce echoes and create a calming environment.

Last but not least, lactation rooms, as York and many other working moms can attest, should have a solid door lock with an occupancy indicator.

Wellness Rooms and Other Alternatives
Lactation rooms can be designed to accommodate multiple users at once. Curtains or partitions can provide some privacy, or individual pumping enclosures can connect to a shared anteroom with common amenities, like the sink and refrigerator, increasing space utilization with the added benefit of creating community among new mothers. Nursing rooms can also double as wellness rooms that are available to all employees. Architects should then be mindful of helping to facilitate space-sharing by giving mothers access to the room, to retrieve their milk and other equipment, at the end of the workday regardless of whether the room is in use. Online scheduling tools can help, but old-school methods like bulletin boards also work.
Scott McDonald

One of the three lactation rooms at the Chesapeake Child Development Center, designed by Elliott + Associates Architects and located in Oklahoma City.

While small businesses—companies with fewer than 50 employees—are not currently required to provide lactation rooms, they can partner with nearby offices with designated pumping rooms, cultivating camaraderie beyond company lines, York suggests. “Creating community is part of the point of architecture,” she says. "This is a great opportunity for people who are going through really hard times in their lives—facing both huge mental and physical challenges while trying to get back to work and continue to grow as professionals. It’s a really weird place in life."

Since York began writing for the AIA on the topic, she has received many emails from architects, owners, and even manufacturers of portable lactation rooms requesting her input on their proposed plans and specifications. She always makes time to respond, no doubt helping untold numbers of new mothers. Additionally, York is educating the next generations of designers on the inclusion and importance of lactation rooms with the hope that these spaces will someday become a priority rather than an afterthought.