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The Historic Therapeutic Use of the Physical Environment by Occupational Therapists in the United States

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Occupational therapists have a long-standing, but little-described, tradition of using the physical environment to influence the health of their clients (Reed, 1986). This study describes the therapeutic use of the physical environment by occupational therapists in the United States over the past century. The study used a grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to document the historical construction of therapists' creation, use, and adaptation of treatment objects and treatment spaces from the early days of the profession to the present. Data included historical occupational therapy literature from the United States from archival and current sources, as well as interview of an occupational therapy historian. Analysis consisted of coding, collaborative critical analysis, memo writing, and visual modeling, initial coding scheme development, code pilot, chronological analysis of data across all time periods from the 1910s through the 2000s, coding scheme revision, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation. Trustworthiness of results was supported through team analysis, significant revisions of coding categories, and the discovery of new concepts.

The results of the study are key discoveries in how therapists use spaces and objects in therapeutic ways. Two concepts, *grade* and *adapt*, serve a pivotal role throughout history of the profession's use of the physical environment in treatment. Therapists' entry, creation, negotiation, expansion, and conceptualization of treatment space became more complex and diversified over history. A typology of four types of human-object interactions will be described as they were differentially expressed over the century: object construction activities by clients, object construction activities by therapists, non-construction activities by clients, and non-construction activities by therapists. Findings demonstrate the complexity of occupational therapy's little-described use of the physical environment in practice. This description can offer novel insights into how the therapeutic use of objects and spaces can be better understood, implemented, researched, and taught, as well as providing a foundation for dialogue regarding international differences in practice.