



MARY HATTLEBUT Photographer

This used to be a Wal-Mart. But with a creative architectural plan and a well-landscaped parking lot, the 82,000-square-foot Daphne site now houses doctors' offices, a surgery center and other medical facilities.

CPR for an empty building

► Architects turn Daphne's gaping former Wal-Mart into a homey medical center

By **KATHY JUMPER**

Real Estate Editor

How do you turn an old Wal-Mart into a state-of-the-art medical center?

The challenge for the new Thomas Medical Center, said architect Mac Walcott of Walcott Adams Verneuille in Fairhope, was "to make it not look like a former Wal-Mart."

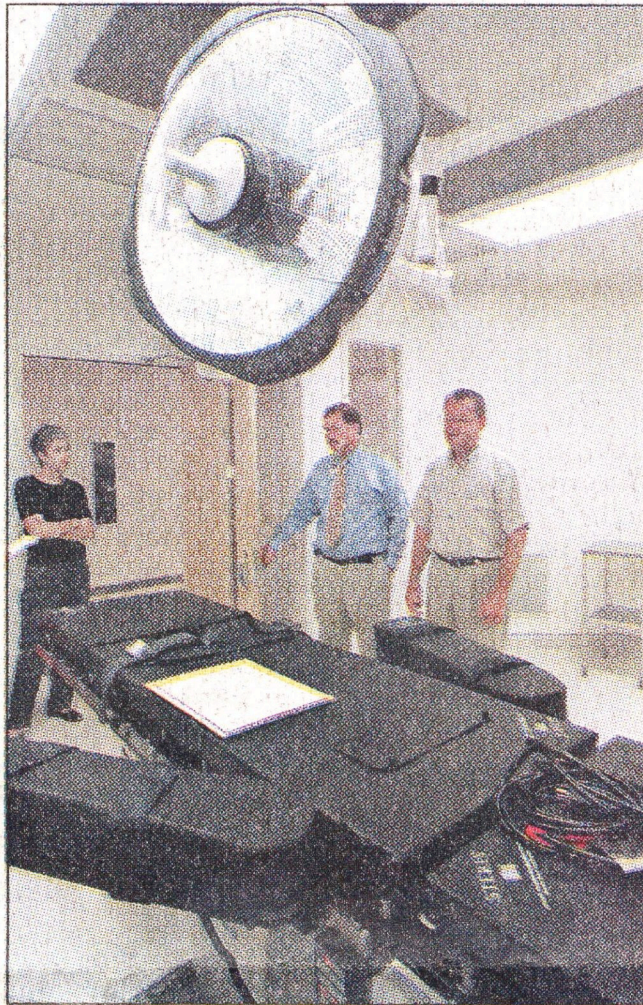
The sewing department in the old store in Daphne is now a surgery center. The garden shop houses administrators and a snack shop. The line of check-out counters has become a "medical mall" — a carpeted lobby with skylights, recessed ceilings, crown molding, soft pastel colors and living-room furniture.

And the endless asphalt parking lot features landscaped islands, flowers, shade trees and fewer parking spaces. The building's facade includes lots of windows, southern columns and a covered entryway.

"This is a good example of how you can recycle an 82,000-square-foot building," Walcott said. Wal-Mart moved out a couple of years ago after the Arkansas-based company built a superstore nearby on U.S. 98 in Daphne. In fact, said Walcott, a town in North Alabama called him asking him for tips on renovating their old Wal-Mart. "This could be a good prototype," he said.

Thomas Hospital's new outpatient surgery and diagnostic center takes up half the space; area physicians are leasing the other half. About 8,000 square feet of office space is available for lease, said Howard Holcomb, assistant administrator at Thomas Medical Center.

"The city loves it," Holcomb said. "You've got a beautiful building out front."



MARY HATTLER/Staff Photographer

The outpatient surgery, above, and a diagnostic center, both affiliated with Thomas Hospital, take up half the building, however, there is space available for physicians to lease.

And, said Walcott, "they've got great landscaping and a hospital."

Actually, the center is "a hospital without beds," Holcomb said. The center offers services such as ambulatory surgery, pain management, an open MRI, mammography, ultrasound, stress testing and a community

education center.

An open house for the public will be held Sept. 19. Already open are Thomas UrgentCare, an after-hours clinic for minor illnesses and injuries, and Eastern Shore Family Practice.

The \$7.5 million project took two years to build and shares the same architectural style, details and facade as the main hospital in Fairhope, said Diana Brewer of Thomas Hospital.

The building is designed to make the flow of patients through the system convenient for them and the medical staff, Holcomb said. It has an unusual group of uses, including free-standing surgery and free-standing diagnostic centers under one roof.

"It's unusual to start an 80,000-square-foot medical facility from scratch," Walcott said. Except for having to hide or camouflage structural beams, the wide-open building was like a blank slate for the architects. It's all designed for optimum flow, he said, with features such as a central nurses station, where the staff can actually see patients from surgery to recovery.

He said the use of floor-to-ceiling glass doors, lots of windows, special cabinets for medical files and comfortable and plentiful waiting areas for patients and their families are all part of the medical center's user-friendly design.

Ms. Brewer said the medical center will be convenient for patients who drive a long distance for diagnostic tests or outpatient surgery, and they expect some Mobile doctors will use the center a couple of days a week.

Thomas plans to begin construction next spring on a primary care center at Historic Malbis off Interstate 10 and Alabama 27.