



Why do it?

The risks and rewards of building your own building

By Genna Levitch, BDS

A dream many practitioners have is to practice in premises they own. It is not difficult to see the attraction. No landlord to annoy you, security of tenure that comes with owning your own property, mortgage to pay off the loan instead of rent which pays off the landlord's loan, and as a long term bonus, an investment that can support you when you retire.

There are other benefits that may not be so obvious, but are very significant. A new building on your own land (known as "greenfield development"), or an upgrade of an existing building (a brownfield development) has a lot more presence than a tenancy inside a building. It may not just be the size, but also the opportunity to project an image. As you drive up to a building, its facade, entrance, colours, textures and parking space all contribute to your initial impression of the business conducted inside.

Owning your own building allows you to control that image.

It is the reason that traditionally, bank buildings were so monumental, in every sense of the word. They used their buildings to give the impression that they are solid, reliable and immovable. Safe. It implies that your money will be safe too. Mostly they succeed. Houses of worship are placed on high ground and have spires that reach for the heavens to imply that this is the place that connects to God. Some even have stained glass windows positioned near the ceiling (clerestory windows), so you will be drawn to look upwards, hopefully in reverence and awe.

These aspects do not occur naturally. For each type of building, there has been

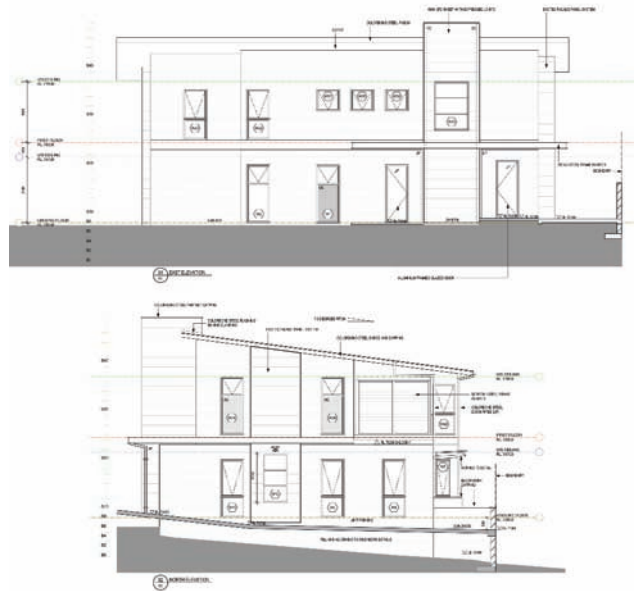


Building exterior, Dental Essentials, Kingaroy, QLD.

at some point in time an architect or designer with a gift for creating a particular built form. A form specifically created to produce a specific response from the public. The response that is aimed for is a feeling or emotion. As in the previous example, religious buildings are designed to elicit a feeling of awe and connection. For nightclubs, it's completely different: to be successful, as you enter there needs to be a feeling of intimacy, excitement and possibilities. This happy discovery of appropriate architectural elements then sets a precedent, which other designers incorporate into their buildings and customise to suit local conditions.

The unique opportunity that a greenfield site has is total control of the built environment. The primary role of the exterior of a commercial building is to advertise the

nature of the experience offered inside and clearly delineate a point of entry. We are influenced more by what we see than what we hear and buildings influence our perceptions using only these visual means. We bond with special buildings like Notre Dame cathedral or the Tower of London. It is the genius of the architect who can create a public building to define a city, such as the Sydney Opera House, or a whole culture, like the Taj Mahal. A building does not need to be impressive to be iconic. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is the simplest: to let a building sit in its surroundings like it belongs there. There is no magic formula, but plenty of guidelines have been discovered. Understanding how architects use these tools and how to speak their language will be covered in a subsequent column.



Building exterior and architectural elevation, Apple Dental, Lane Cove NSW.

The vast bulk of dentists in Australia are sole practitioners. Their requirements are simple, their ambitions and incomes correspondingly modest. As a profession we are protected from competition and can do well with little effort to differentiate or promote our services.

Some dentists find themselves in a situation where either due to personal or clinical skills, the lack of competition, location, or all of the above, they find themselves just far too busy. The choice is to either close the appointment book or look at ways to meet the demand.

Moving to better location, expanding to larger premises, putting on another dentist, hygienist or partner are all financial, management and lifestyle choices dentists need to make when deciding which path suits them.

The dentists in this position are rarely delighted to be making a major move involving commitments of previously unimagined amounts of money. On the contrary they are pragmatic and cautious, knowing that expansion will tax their expertise, resources and energy. They are often going through this process for the first time in their lives and although the rewards are there, so are the risks.

Having worked with hundreds of dentists to help them expand, it is a relief to say that

none of these dentists lost money or regretted the move. The common factor to their success would be their ability to pick the right team, because you can't do this on your own; in fact, a greenfield project involves many people. Directly, you will deal with maybe several dozen; indirectly perhaps hundreds. The chain of command, level of responsibility and the transient nature of the project makes this a different model to running a dental practice.

At some point, the practitioner will need to trust a person who he or she has selected to manage the process. Blind trust is a bit too cavalier; it is best to at least have some understanding of the process. That is the purpose of this series - to provide commercially critical information in a digestible form. Knowledge helps reduce the risk!

In this series we will cover all the steps in the building process and hopefully answer such questions as:

- What size block do I need in relation to number of surgeries?
- How much can I pay for it?
- What space will I need for growth?
- How do I choose an architect?
- What internal space will I need?
- How do I decide how the building will look?
- What are the construction options?
- What are the funding options?

- How do I separate being a developer from being a practice owner?
- Why does it cost so much? And where does the money go?
- Why does it take so long?
- Why are councils so obstructive when I am providing a public service?
- When is it actually finished?
- Why wasn't I told about the extra costs? and
- Now that I've got it, how do I run my practice at top gear?

That is our expertise. In the last 10 years we have learnt to straddle dentistry, architecture, town planning, building and finance. We belong to professional associations in these industries and collecting CPD points for each one is challenging. It is also in the spirit of the collegiate nature of our profession to share our experiences for the larger good.

About the author

Genna Levitch is a regular contributor to Australasian Dental Practice on subjects related to practice design. He worked as a dentist in private practice for 25 years and for the past 10 years, has been a director of Levitch Design Associates, a specialist Healthcare Design and Construct firm. He can be contacted on (02) 9880-9300 or www.levitch.com.au