

# Practices made perfect

When it comes to clinic design, a successful marriage of form and function can foster a more efficient workplace and a healthier bottom line. By James McCarthy.



**I**t's fair to say that few people enjoy a trip to the dentist. There are a number of reasons for this; for some it's the fear of painful procedures and the cost associated with them. For others it's the sound of the drill, or the antiseptic smell that seems to linger in the nostrils. But for many patients it is the claustrophobic nature of the clinic itself. A dimly lit waiting room bearing concrete features and out-of-date gossip magazines is enough to shake the most poised patient, and is likely to do little to motivate the staff either.

However, the times they are a-changing, and the rise in Hollywood-style dental treatments has brought with it a slice of Hollywood's upmarket glamour to clinic design.

With a bit of initiative, Middle Eastern dentists can embrace this revolution because, underneath the wall colourings and soft lighting, there is a functional, and more importantly, a profitable foundation to the design principle.

### LET IT FLOW

For Dr Genna Levitch, the benefits of good clinic design are twofold. From a marketing perspective, it marks your practice out from the crowd. From a commercial outlook, a well-designed workplace is more streamlined, productive and motivating - which can only help a clinic's bottom line.

Levitch, director of Levitch Design Associates (LDA), claims: "We always survey clients about 12 months [after a redesign] and, in most cases, the average increase in turnover is around 40%. The feedback we get is that the cost of hiring a designer can pay for itself in a fairly short space of time."

Natasha Connor of Ego Square Design ranks workspace as a deciding factor in any clinic's success. "A good layout and workflow is very important when it comes to productivity," she says. "It's also important to take aesthetics into consideration.

If the surgery is designed correctly, the workflow is right and the practice is appealing, staff and patients feel comfortable.

"That means your staff are more likely to stay and patients are more likely to come back and recommend you to their friends and family."

### SPACED OUT

According to Levitch, there are two key aspects of practice design - space planning and finishes, which includes elements such as colours, lighting and surfaces. Space planning, he says, is divided into the three functional areas of a practice: public, private and clinical spaces.

In the last 20 years, Levitch has documented the setting of each dental chair installed by his company during fit-outs. Based on the environmental data he has collected, he has compiled a formula to simplify the planning of clinical spaces. One dental chair, he explains, requires at least 50 sq m, and the squarer the clinic space the more efficiently it can be used. This ready-reckoner almost immediately gives the practice designer an idea of how much traffic flow will be required for a two, four, six or eight chair clinic.

"Ideally, the corridors should be short, while a higher number of chairs will require wider passageways," Levitch says. "Also, clinical areas should be situated close to sterilising areas because these are high traffic zones where staff will be moving back and forth quickly and frequently."

High volume workspaces need careful consideration, to ensure design doesn't hamper productivity.

"Design in these sections is usually very subtle. For two nurses to pass each other, you need a corridor with a width of 1.2 metres minimum," reports Levitch. "If it is any less than that, they will have to pirouette around each other, increasing the risk of injury by bumping into one another or...colliding with a patient. Immediately you are making the working environment safer and

more efficient, which in turn leads to higher productivity".

While in theory allocating 50 sq m per dental chair may seem acceptable, in practice few clinics boast such ample space. Dr Maximilian Riewer is the director of the Dubai Sky Clinic. Situated 21 floors up, with jaw dropping views across the emirate, it is undeniably one of the more spectacularly designed dental practices in the region.

"The designer always needs tons of space," he says, with a wry smile. "For him the perfect clinic would have just two dental chairs and 4,000 square feet of space."

But financially this is not feasible, especially in cities such as Dubai where rents, winces Riewer, can be as sky-high as his clinic. He does agree, though, that clinics should be spacious enough to ensure that neither patients nor staff feel claustrophobic.

"I agree with the idea that you must have some space [around the dental chair]. There are government regulations in Dubai that set out the minimum space that is required, but if you extend it a little bit, many people say that is luxury. In my opinion it is essential for me and the patient. It gives the clinic a special touch and it allows you to breathe."

Taking into account the 10-hour days many dentists put in, the design details of their workspace - specifically that around the dental chair - can have a huge impact on the dentist's occupational health.

"We have worked very hard on the ergonomics of the clinical space," admits Levitch, "particularly on the repetitive actions performed by dentists."

When planning a surgery, the position of the benches, lights and surrounding surfaces should all be organised to minimise the movement required by the dentist.

"It is crucial that the dentist doesn't have to stretch or strain in their movements too much in a way that could cause back pain or allow other similar problems to develop," Levitch stresses.

“The initial cost of hiring a designer can pay for itself in a fairly short space of time.”

### SEEING THE LIGHT

First impressions count with any business, but none more so than in an industry where the end product is cosmetic.

“Over the years I have met dentists with an eye for design, who know what they are looking for and understand where we can help improve their business,” Levitch explains. “On the other hand, we have dentists come to us saying, ‘I don’t know a good design from the back of an Andy Warhol, but I know this stuff works.’”

And good design does work, as anyone has walked into the Dubai Sky Clinic will attest. The smart minimalist design, coupled with the waiting area’s stunning 21st floor vistas of the UAE’s busiest city, delivers enough of a ‘wow’ factor to distract any patient from the upcoming procedures.

“I had a vision of what I wanted; I wanted to be a little different,” Riewer explains.

“Everybody is scared when they go to the dentist; I wanted them to relax when they arrive at the clinic.”

Lighting can play a key role in calming patients. The fluorescent overhead strips traditionally favoured by dental clinics are now a cardinal sin by design standards.

“A good space plan will take into account a comfortable, well-lit waiting and reception area where patients will immediately know where they are supposed to go,” notes Levitch. “This is essential, particularly for new patients, to feel comfortable.”

“A lot of our designs incorporate under-desk or under-seat lighting to act as a kind of beacon to patients. In unfamiliar or stressful situations people respond better to visual stimuli rather than by reading a sign, so when they enter the practice they will



• The right combination of lighting and layout can help put patients at ease.

instinctively follow the bright light to the reception desk or to the seating.”

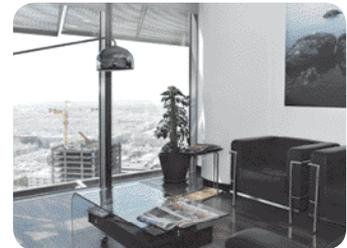
Lighting can be a delicate balance though. As Connor points out, staff and patients don’t want to feel exposed, but equally don’t want to feel like they are trapped in a dimly-lit rabbit warren.

“It’s important that the location of the rooms [independently] makes sense,” she stresses. “People don’t want to be confused.”

To calm patients, Connor advises paying attention to low-cost changes that can be made to surfaces and flooring. Tactile soft-furnishings in soothing colours are widely thought to create a more welcoming environment. When combined with scents, she says, to tackle the clinical smell associated with surgeries, these small changes can make a marked difference to the feel of a practice.

### TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Still, before dentists can begin poring over soft furnishings and



Mark Rothko prints, there are some fundamental issues that need to be considered about the practice.

“Before a dentist can start dreaming of the perfect clinic they have to make sure the technical requirements are supported,” says Riewer.

Dental clinics require specific drainage systems and have greater power requirements than most businesses; two elements that need to be built into any design plan. Dentists may also find themselves needing to rein in over-enthusiastic design staff.

“One designer came up with the idea of a small river-like water

“ At the end of the day it is still a clinic, which gives you limits - not only on the construction side but with the building’s landlord.”

feature in the reception with a small bridge,” recalls Riewer. “From an aesthetic and a theoretical point of view it was a great idea, but one wrong step to the left or right and the customer would have very wet feet. It would not be practical.”

Riewer advises remembering that design must be realistic. “At the end of the day it is still a clinic, which gives you limits - not only on the construction side, but also with the building’s landlord.

“It is not always possible to convert the gimmicks and ideas in your head into actual reality because of those limits.”

He notes that there were long discussions to get approval for the ideas that the team came up with. For instance, the clinic draws a lot of power and Riewer laughingly admits that the Sky Clinic is on the limit of its supply. “Five more lamps and we are out of business,” he chuckles. He also struggled to ensure the clinic had a guaranteed water supply.

“You have to make sure with the contractor that you get enough water and get the right approvals for drainage,” he warns. “Don’t cut corners with this, invest money on employing a specialist. You cannot just open it up if it goes wrong once the practice is up and running, not without closing the clinic down.

“It was a serious challenge getting approval for these things.”

#### THE FIRST RULE OF DESIGN: LOCATION

While the birthing process might have been painful, Riewer insists that that the finished Dubai Sky practice has already more than paid for itself.

The design of the practice and

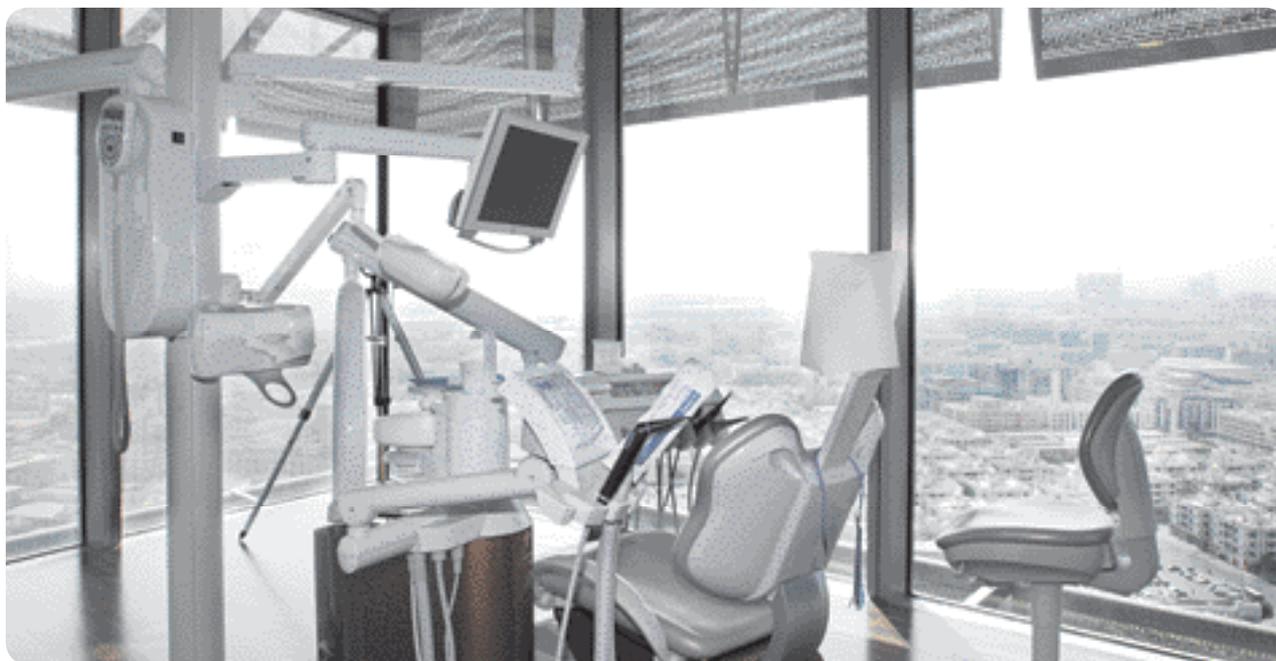
its prime location next to one of Dubai’s premier shopping malls has given Riewer and his team a unique marketing tool.

“When people hear about us and ask, ‘What’s so special about your clinic?’ we can refer them to our website. Once they see the pictures, they want to come and see the practice for themselves.”

He adds that the marriage of design, location and service at the clinic has also produced a good return from the most important advertising tool available to dentists: word of mouth referrals.

“We have quite a few customers who come to us as a result of recommendations from their friends. From a marketing perspective, we can present ourselves with many unusual aspects that other clinics cannot offer, starting with the location, the view and the furniture.

“People are now taking more notice of these things, particularly in Dubai. They have their fancy cars, their fashion and their art. We want them to come in and think, ‘Wow! This fits in with my lifestyle.’”



• The Dubai Sky Clinic’s stunning 21st floor views are enough to distract patients from the procedure at hand.