

# How I did it

**Diana Spencer** looks back on her experience of refurbishing an outdated practice and reflects on the possibilities and the difficulties of an old building, the opportunities that arise when things don't necessarily go to plan and the importance of planning for the future



I graduated from Guy's Hospital in 1974. Throughout my career I've worked as an associate in mixed practices and also for a corporate dental and as a practice owner, running multiple surgeries at once. I spent many years honing my skills and developed a talent for helping nervous patients. I also worked abroad, spending three years in a private practice in Jerusalem.

In 2010, having worked for two years in a corporate environment, I had a

real passion to make the move to becoming a practice owner once again.

Having had a number of unfortunate experiences at the dentist as a child, my approach has always been to create a calm, family-friendly atmosphere for the 21st century. In 2008/9, I studied for a postgraduate certificate in paediatric dentistry at the Eastman Dental Institute, as part of my commitment to life-long learning and enhancing my skills in treating children.

## Location, location, location

My dream was to have my own family-oriented, private practice, located near my home in north London to serve the local community. Fortunately, at the time I started searching for premises, I discovered an advert in the dental press for a small private practice for sale in St John's Wood.

The surgery is situated in a highly residential area, in a parade of shops and on one of the most iconic roads in London – Abbey Road. It all added up to a location that couldn't have been better!

Despite its age, its small size and the fact that the last refurbishment had been two decades ago, I knew from the moment I walked in that the practice had great potential.

The large, single treatment room could easily become two smaller surgeries, one dental and one for the hygienist, and the unused corridor would be the decontamination room. The high ceilings and big windows offered plenty of natural light, which would help to create a fresh, clean and modern environment, as well as offering the perfect light for shade matching.

Even better, because the building was already a dental surgery, it didn't require permission for 'change of use', so we were able to begin renovations immediately.

## Unexpected issues

The purchase of the practice went through in June 2011, and I set myself a goal of opening in October the same year. I approached Henry Schein Dental, deciding that a single supplier would be the most efficient approach for the project. The need to make the most of the limited space available, and the challenge of creating two treatment rooms from one, meant that an innovative design and layout was crucial to achieving the surgery I wanted.

I hadn't envisaged just how much additional work I would face with the refurbishment, however! The beauty of the building's high ceilings and natural light came from its Victorian architecture. Unfortunately, that Victorian pedigree also led to an unexpected issue with the walls. Our intended approach of adding some partition walls was halted when we discovered that the walls were completely original – and consequently filled with lime and horsehair.

They had to be completely taken back to the studs, the floor and ceiling had to be replaced and my tight timescale looked to be in peril. But with tremendous help from the contractors and Schein, we were able to replace the outdated building materials, relocate the compressor from the building roof to inside the surgery and create the treatment rooms, reception and decontamination room in time for the scheduled opening.

We did discover an unexpected benefit from the additional

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work. As we had to build the new walls from scratch, we were able to hide all the electrical and network cabling inside the plaster work, adding to the sense of space and tranquility I wanted to achieve, keeping the untidiness of the technology out of sight.

### Space-driven design

One of the most important features, to me, is how the surgery looks and feels; I wanted to create an inviting and completely modern environment. I approached Charlotte Heather, a talented interior designer, who helped design a calm, light space using pale colours throughout the practice.

A striking feature wall welcomes patients into the surgery, and the furniture in the reception area was chosen specifically to create a tranquil and friendly experience.

The reception desk is deliberately low, avoiding the illusion of a barrier between patients and staff and adding to the sense of space, while the seating is low, comfortable and perfectly proportioned.

The inventive way the design used drawers and pull-out units in the treatment rooms means that, even with the volume of equipment and the limited floor space we have to work with, surfaces remain uncluttered.

I also set Charlotte a challenge to find lights that were compliant while being aesthetically pleasing. As it turns out, any lighting is permissible as long as the units are completely sealed, meaning we were able to use lighting that is in keeping with the rest of the design – even in the surgeries.

The Henry Schein consultant, Dan Payne, ensured that cabinetry and equipment had enough clearance to avoid any issues, while using the ceiling height to great effect to create additional space for storage. Glass-topped partition walls make optimum use of the existing natural light and help the small surgeries feel light and unconfined.

### Making it work

The logistical planning for the fitting of the surgery equipment was something that required intricate attention to detail. The water and electrics provided by the builder Nalko Nedialkov and his team needed to be perfectly matched with the fitting of the treatment centre, compressor, autoclave and other equipment.

Financial pressures meant that it wasn't possible for me to invest in every piece of equipment I wanted right at the start. So, with an eye to the future, the surgery was designed with space and power to





incorporate the additional items as soon as I was ready for them. This level of forward planning avoids the logistical difficulties in trying to add new equipment into a small space and gave me the freedom to budget for essentials while knowing I had the room to grow.

Making optimum use of the space available, I equipped the surgeries with identical Sirona C8+ treatment centres, which provide everything I need in a neat compact unit. The location of the chair in the hygienist treatment room had to be scrupulously planned out, to ensure enough space to move the arm. We managed to fit it in perfectly, with an inch of clearance!

Meeting CQC and HTM 01-05 regulations is critical, and with guidance constantly being updated, Henry Schein Dental's decontamination specialists provided excellent help and support. They ensured that guidelines were adhered to at every stage of development – which came in handy when the CQC decided to plan its inspection for nine days before the practice opened to patients.

### Inside and out

One of my aims was to create an atmosphere of clinical excellence with a friendly face, from the moment a patient walks in. But with the surgery on the second floor of the building, the entrance was an area that needed some attention. After managing to obtain the consent of the building's landlord, I upgraded the signage, painted the front door a vibrant turquoise and redesigned the entrance hall.



Adding a mirrored wall into the narrow hallway created a sense of light and calm, bringing the building's shared spaces up to the same level of design and care that is applied to the surgery itself. The improvements to the building as a whole have led to me developing an excellent relationship with the landlord as well as projecting the image of the surgery from the first time a patient sees the front door right through their journey.

### Growth and opportunity

My decision to plan for adding future items of equipment has stood the surgery in good stead, allowing us to accommodate additional technologies and services such as intraoral cameras and digital radiography a little further down the line.

Designing for growth has allowed me to develop our in-house abilities and build a dedicated, professional and happy team who reflect the ethos of the surgery.

When I took on the practice, I inherited a nurse/receptionist, with no other staffing. In order to deliver the service level our patients expect and deserve, I changed the team to a full-time receptionist as





well as a nurse. I brought in a dental hygienist/therapist within a week of opening, a service not offered by the previous owner. I also have a talented visiting restorative dentist and implantologist, which means the practice can offer everything in-house without the need to send patients to other providers for specialist treatment.

After taking on the surgery, I purchased computers for all the rooms, installed Software of Excellence and took on the daunting task of updating all the paper files to digital. We were then able to write to all of the practice's existing patients to reassure them that their dental care could be continued with the same approach that they had been used to. In fact, my dental philosophy was the driving force in the previous owner's decision to sell the practice to me.

I set up a website that reflected the ethos of the practice: clean, clear and easy to use. This has stood me in good stead as a great number of new patients find us on the internet.

Finally, I organised local marketing with targeted leafleting and 'recommend a friend' promotions. Regular newsletters are now sent to new and existing patients.

### In hindsight

Abbey Road Dental is not my first practice, and my experience in running and refurbishing other premises gave me an excellent grounding from which to tackle this project. The things I learned from past mistakes and successes meant that I knew exactly what I wanted to achieve at the surgery. As a result, I don't think there's anything that I would change. Of course, I spent a little more than I had expected, which meant deferring some equipment upgrades for a few months.



It would have been helpful to know the scale of the work that would be required in updating the walls, but that's not something we could have foreseen. And if I could go back to the final three weeks of the refurbishment, I would probably try to avoid breaking my ankle – that wasn't the easiest way to work, especially with a flight of stairs to traverse!

Overall, though, I'm extremely happy with the final result. I was able to meet my scheduled reopening, and everyone worked extremely hard to facilitate that.

### Give it your all

I would advise any other dentist planning a similar project to give it 100% commitment – not only the refurbishment, but the early days of establishing the practice as well. From the start I was constantly available, diverting calls to the surgery to my mobile phone, and accessing the surgery computers from home.

Maintain your enjoyment of the job, and design the surgery to help you do that. Dentistry needs intense concentration and is physically and emotionally demanding. The environment I have created is one that makes me excited to go to work; if space is important to you then make sure your design keeps that in mind.

Pay attention to the details; keep an eye on the little things that make a difference to how you work, for instance comfortable chairs, good quality equipment, plenty of light, screens not too high or low, backup systems in case of equipment failure! And, most of all, a great team to work with you who share your aspirations and passion for excellence.

Owning a practice isn't for everyone, but if it is your dream then the biggest piece of advice is to plan for it. Choose suppliers and designers that understand your needs and appreciate your ethos, so that they can help you create a surgery you'll be proud of, that meets your requirements and delivers on its promises.

Fiscal discipline is a crucial part of any project. Don't buy equipment you can't afford but don't stint on quality. Plan for it, and design your surgery to accommodate it in the future, but if your budget won't stretch then waiting is the best option rather than compromising with second best – budget for essentials, but plan for growth.

I have achieved my goal of creating a practice that is based on very firm philosophies – establishing long-term relationships with patients based on trust, compassion and empathy. I'm still delighted with the look of the surgery, and now I want to make additions to the services we offer, such as a full-time direct access hygienist clinic for adults and children. Watch this space! [PD](#)

COMPANIES INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

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