Journey into Space

Roger Gullidge, Joint Managing Director of Paradigm Design, explains how you may find that there is often more room in a practice than first meets the eye.

For a good number of practices one of the most difficult problems is finding the space to work to optimum efficiency. Ironically the problem is often a symptom of success, because it can directly relate to and be exacerbated by growth in the business.

Of course, it is easy for us all to be wise after the event, but, it always pays to think ahead and not simply cater to meet perceived immediate needs. In this article, I would like to give you some practical guidance on ‘finding space’ and demonstrate that there is often more of it that you may think! I would not claim to have invented a dental Tardis, but in my experience the majority of practices do not use the space available to best effect.

Starting from scratch

If you are at the stage of moving premises or buying your first practice, then I urge you to take a number of considerations into account, beyond simply the appeal of the building. Take a little time to think seriously about the following:

- area, location and environment
- type of patients to treat
- type of dentistry you do now and may want to do in the future
- staff recruitment and training facilities
- number of associates, now and in the future
- specialist treatments and equipment
- hygienist services
- retailing of oral health products
- referral considerations
- LDU requirements
- practice computerisation
- existing patients (if appropriate)
- existing staff (if appropriate)
- competition
- family and lifestyle

This list is not intended to be comprehensive and a number of the points may not be completely relevant to your particular circumstances. The point I want to make is that the type and size of the building you ideally need is governed by factors that are not immediately obvious. It is not simply down to the number of surgeries you can fit in.

Finding the right premises

Once you have decided that your planning is complete you should share it with your advisers.

From a business point of view, this will include your accountant and any other management consultants you work with. In terms of finding the right property you need to utilise the services of an architect and/or designer who understands dentistry. The specification of the practice and the advice this makes this essential. Your architect/designer will need a sound working knowledge of practice work flow, dental procedures, equipment siting and the various legislation and regulations that apply to dentistry.

At Paradigm, we always recommend undertaking a feasiblity study. A small cost is involved, but it will unquestionably help avoid potentially costly errors being made. Our advice is also to avoid the often well intentioned guidance of estate agents and builders in relation to the suitability and potential of a building. They may be good at their jobs, but this rarely, if ever, includes an understanding of the myriad of rules and regulations that require a comprehensive degree of specialist knowledge and expertise.

Your feasibility study will take account of a wide range of issues that will include:

- type and age of property
- suitability for purpose
- potential for growth
- access
- transport and parking
- local demographics
- competition
- Planning and Building Permission and time scales
- outline budgets and funding required

Principles into practice

I have recently been working with Dr Ajiaz Syed, a dentist in Streatham, on the project for a new practice. He has practised in Streatham since 1999, but his existing premises were considered unsuitable for the development and expansion he had in mind. In 2005 he started looking for new premises and after a number of false starts, focused on the type and location for the high visibility high street position he wanted.

Without labouring the point, whilst the building ticked all the boxes in relation to location, there were problems that required creative thinking in order that they could be resolved. One of the practical problems (and one that is often too easily dismissed early on) was site clearance. In a busy high street location removal of several hundred tonnes of rubble could not simply be a matter of parking lorries outside. By some judicious planning we overcame the difficulties with a minimum of disruption to the local community. And maintaining a dentist’s good relationship with the community must always be a priority.

As our first on-site meeting, Ajiaz had a number of advisers with him, including his builder. A builder will assess the potential of a building based on previous experience. This experience will rarely include understanding actual construction and structure.

Additionally, a builder’s assessment of what can and can’t be done may be influenced by previous Local Authority Planning rulings that went against him, simply because they were incorrectly or inadequately submitted. In these circumstances, builders will often tend to make decisions too early, and as was the case in Streatham, fail to understand space planning potential.

However by utilising what the builder considered unusable space and correcting his lack of knowledge about access, we have worked with Ajiaz to create a stunning two level practice.

A good architect will work closely with Planning Authorities.