

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Dentist turned architect Richard Mitzman is winning awards for reinventing the dental surgery. **Peter Kelly** overcame his phobia and went for a check up



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It was my first visit to the dentist for 15 years. My memories were of dreary waiting rooms, depressing surgeries, and an awful lot of pain. The dread-filled shuffle down a dimly lit corridor to the consulting room stuck particularly in my mind. But a visit to the Advance Dental Clinic in Chelmsford, which recently won a RIBA award, couldn't have been more different: white walls, glass surfaces, and a well-placed skylight in the surgery that allowed me to see a blue sky while being examined. It all contributed to an atmosphere of calm and trust that left me in a quite vulnerable state of tranquillity – I almost signed up for a course of treatment that was well beyond anything I could afford.

My dental phobia, like that of many others, had been cured by dentist-turned-architect Richard Mitzman. During the Seventies and Eighties, Mitzman became known as the Amalgam King, for his technique of carrying out perfect, simple amalgams on teeth. His latest surgery, Maple House Orthodontics, has just been completed in Slough (see opposite), and his architectural work is receiving increasing recognition from international clients. Dentist practices, of which he has now completed a dozen, account for only 25 to 30

percent of his clients – he has completed residential projects in the UK and Switzerland – but it is his clinical work that is grabbing the most attention. The question is, how does a successful dentist become an award-winning architect in the space of two decades?

Mitzman always had an inquisitive and creative mind that wasn't entirely fulfilled by dentistry. All through his years spent restoring teeth, he had been a keen sculptor, as well as producing occasional inventions such as a staining toothpaste that turned plaque pink (unfortunately, it also turned hands and clothes pink, and never became a marketable product). In the late Seventies, Mitzman treated a new patient who was to encourage his more artistic talents – Henry Moore was advised by his accountant to visit his fellow sculptor as a patient. 'He liked the idea of going to another sculptor as a dentist,' says Mitzman. It became a genuine and important friendship that continued throughout the last 10 years of Moore's life. The celebrated sculptor encouraged Mitzman to start drawing, and Moore's death coincided with what Mitzman describes as his own career-changing mid-life crisis.

In 1987, Mitzman retired from his dentistry practice

Main picture, Richard Mitzman in the Slough surgery with client Dr Michael Cheung; above, the award-winning Advance Dental Clinic in Chelmsford

CHRIS SIMS



to sculpt in Italy, although his ambitious nature never disappeared. 'From the moment I started sculpting full time, I gave myself three years to have my first solo show,' he said. He succeeded, with a show at the Boundary Gallery, London, in 1990. During the following five years, along with his sculpting, he invented a brush for watercolour painting (the Magic Paintbrush, manufactured by Hasbro), and the Acrobat Stroller, a smart baby buggy that is still in development. He then realised that architecture could be a perfect combination of his skills and interests. Before Mitzman had even finished his architectural degree, he had designed and built his first project, a children's dental clinic in Weymouth.

It seems incredible that someone can achieve so much in one field and give it all up to pursue a new, complex vocation from scratch. 'Architecture's not technical,' says Mitzman. 'You bring someone in who knows how to do that stuff. It's like when I was a dentist, I did restorative work and then would refer the patients to specialists for other treatment.' He has realised that his strength lies in producing pragmatic solutions to problems in a way that has sculptural beauty. What he brings is an intricate understanding of how dentists work and a strong aesthetic sense, rather than profound technical expertise: 'I'm too old to know it all,' he says happily.

The Mitzman design philosophy involves an intimate marriage of sleek, minimalist architecture and innovative working practices for dentists. Due to his background, he often has a more lucid understanding of his clients' needs than they do themselves – tidying up inefficiencies and producing a calming work environment. 'There are two key elements to dentist practices: controlling cross-infection, and ergonomics,' says Mitzman. Every aspect of his work contributes to aiding these factors.

Central to most of his designs is the installation of a glass shelf in the surgery, on which the dentist keeps his surgical instruments. Traditionally, dentist surgeries are full of basic cabinets which become full of clutter; Mitzman's shelf forces dentists to keep a tidier, cleaner surgery. 'The thing about the glass shelf is that it is seen to be clean. In fact, it is seen to be more than clean. It has to be sterile. Cabinets are always full of rubbish, and the longer instruments are in there, the dirtier they become,' he declares.

His designs also always allow for two surgeries in the



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Richard Mitzman's latest project, Maple House Orthodontics, in Slough. The practice includes the characteristic glass shelf (bottom left) and the steri-wall, with an entirely separate cleaning area (above)

SEEING MITZMAN'S WORK AS A SHALLOW BEAUTIFICATION UNDERESTIMATES HIS AMBITION AND THOUGHTFULNESS. IN DENTAL PRACTICES, A BIG VISUAL IMPACT IS IMPORTANT

practice, with two treatment chairs. Again it is all about efficiency and reducing stress. 'The whole idea of having two chairs is not to treat two patients at once,' he explains. 'You can finish the patient in one chair, say goodbye, go to a new perfectly clean surgery, and the next patient is sitting in the chair so you can start work – there is no changeover between patients. And that actually adds up to at least five minutes a patient, which can add up to an hour a day wasted cleaning the chair, which actually takes up six weeks of the year. Just by getting a second chair, you can turn your business around. Having that extra surgery is like having a valve that lets out all the stress from the practice.'

The final signature element is the central storage unit, the Steri-wall, which divides the floorplan in two and can be accessed from both sides. This allows the dentist to place dirty instruments in one side to be picked up and cleaned from the other – the processing of the instruments is done completely separately from the surgeries. It is also part of Mitzman's ergonomic method of laying out the practices: having two corridors, which give clear, separate channels for staff and patients to travel through.

He still faces a struggle to get his idea universally accepted. 'I've tried to get the health service involved with it,' he says. 'A health minister came to visit the NHS practice I designed in Castle Vale, Birmingham. I said, "Look, this is the blueprint for the health service. You'll get people who want to work in it, you'll draw young practitioners in, allow them to earn enough money. The only way to do this is using these principles." They agreed entirely, and did nothing – except give the client an MBE for services to design in the health service.'

There has been criticism from some conservative dentists, who have accused the designs of promoting appearance over medical practice. My experience suggests that seeing Mitzman's work as a shallow beautification underestimates his ambition and thoughtfulness. In dental practices where the work comes largely from recommendations and referrals, a big visual impact is important. Through his designs, as I discovered, Mitzman has developed a style that works for both dentists and patients. A trip to the dentist is no longer the stuff of nightmares ■