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 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 established that your find and 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 specialist knowledge and expertise 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 feasibility 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 Permisson and time scales
- outline budgets and funding required

Principles into practice

I have recently been working with Dr Ajiaz Seed, a dentist in Streatham and what we have achieved is a good example of what I have been talking about and clearly demonstrates the value of setting clear objectives and assessing the true potential of a building.

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.

Nothing should be done without pre-consultation and patience will be the key, particularly in situations where an architect and designer will sense he or she doesn’t have to take “no” as an answer.

Finally, a word on costs. This can be a complex subject, particularly if, once the project is underway, you change your mind. In short you then leave yourself open to the infamous ‘EOT’s’ (extras on top) and these can be crippling. Once again, it pays to work closely with your architect/designer and ensure that your contract with the builder does not include penalty clauses over which you have little or no control.

The project for Ajiaz effectively realised 135sqm of usable space, whereas 74sqm might have been considered insufficient! We worked closely with Planning Authorities, overcame problems and brought the project in on time and budget. Most important – Ajiaz now has a practice with high street presence, attracts new patients and is a joy to work in.

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