

IN BUSINESS

I was a top dentist, but I'll never be the top architect – there will always be something more to strive for, **Richard Mitzman** tells Moira Crawford



The name of architect Richard Mitzman is synonymous in the dental world with modern, sleek, minimalist, beautiful yet extremely functional surgery design. In his surgeries, infection control principles and ergonomics combine to create a stunning but entirely practical working environment. He has won a RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) award for his new build at Advance Dental Clinic in Chelmsford, while Pentangle Dental Clinic in Newbury, Berkshire, another of his designs, has just won the Best New Practice category at the 2007 *Private Dentistry* Awards. Richard's work includes homes, apartments and offices too, but his particular success in designing dental practices is in no small part due to his unique insight into how a dental practice should work, having been a top dental practitioner himself for 20 years.

Richard's career path to date has been very unusual. 'At the age of about 14 I wanted to be an architect but my parents dissuaded me. I then considered medicine and finally went for dentistry. I don't regret it. Dentistry has been very good to me,' he said. He qualified from University College Hospital in 1967, and went straight into general practice, 'I soon realised I still had a great deal to learn, so I spoke to my professor and after six months in practice returned to UCH as his house surgeon. He'd never had an assistant who'd actually worked in practice and because I knew what I was doing, I was able to clear his waiting lists very quickly.'

He then went back into practice in Chelsea, but realised again that there was still much to learn. Endodontist Max Walter offered Richard a place in his practice, probably the best in London at the time, provided he went off to study restorative dentistry at the University of Southern California. Thanks to Professor Prophet's reference, he got a place without needing an interview. It turned out something of a shock. 'I'd allowed £200 for instruments, but when I arrived was shown the 'issue', a collection of everything you would need to be a dentist – it cost \$4,700 in 1969. I almost came straight back.' But he managed to buy everything second hand from an ex-student who was going into orthodontics and would not need much of the kit, and raised the money through a research grant – the work involved X-raying the offspring of pregnant mice exposed to hypothermia, the tiny embryos being roughly the size of a dental X-ray.

Into practice

He graduated with a DDS in restorative dentistry six months early, having done five times the amount of work needed. 'I discovered gold onlays and was enthralled by them. They are the seminal dental restoration. I did them on all my colleagues and although you needed to do six to eight onlays for the course, I did several times that!' After an amazing time in California, he went straight into practice with Max Walter at 43 Wimpole Street for three years, until Dr Walter died, leaving Richard at 28 with one of the best practices in London, and more patients than he could cope with. 'I learned more from him than anyone else, about patient management, practice management and clinical skills. He was a font of knowledge,' says Richard.

He took on four associates, all American graduates in different specialities, but found the experience 'a nightmare' with practice overheads reaching 85%, and eventually moved on his own to a new apartment down the street. 'When I was planning my new practice I realised that none of the ones designed for me would work, and so I sorted the design out myself,' he recalls, and this was the start of his involvement with dental surgery design. He remained there for 12 years, working from two surgeries, a system he continues to recommend, and separate consulting room for conversation with patients. 'Twin chairs are central to my philosophy and significantly raise a dentist's earning plateau,' he explains, pointing out that having a second chair enables one surgery to be cleaned properly while the other is in use, reducing stress on the dentist and making him significantly more efficient, saving about five minutes per patient, the equivalent of several working weeks per year. 'I install twin surgeries in all my practices and it always works.'

By now he was working hard, lecturing regularly, and had made a name for himself as the 'Amalgam King' because of his illustrations of his amalgam restorations. 'I wasn't obsessed with amalgam; I was just trying to show that perfection can be achieved in anything,' he argues. He had also launched a couple of businesses: Baby Orthodontic Products, importing orthodontic teats and soothers, and steam sterilisers and, with some other dentists, Compudent, marketing computer equipment based on software developed from his practice management systems. The



An example of Mitzman's signature style: Maple House Orthodontics

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company is still trading, though under different ownership. In 1977 he set up the 'ABSURD Study Club' (Attainment of Better Standards and Understanding of Restorative Dentistry!). There were six members: Mike Wise, Nicolas Sturridge (the Queen's dentist), James Dewe-Matthews, John McCormack and Brian Parkins. All were American trained and members of the American Dental Society of London (ADSL) and ADSE (Europe). 'We watched each other work one day a month and latterly bi-monthly for 12 years. The dentist presenting had to defend his procedures and work and learned the most. It changed all of our practices - probably more than studying in the States'. He was also secretary of the ADSL from 1978-9, which took a lot of time. 'I realised I was working flat out, and at 42 had achieved 90% of what I was going to be able to achieve in the dental world. I was looking at another 20 years in practice, earning more and treating more famous people, and it wasn't enough for a life's work.'

Sculpture and invention

So in 1987 Richard gave it all up, sold his practice and

went to Pietrasanta, Italy, to work full-time at his great love and long term hobby: sculpture. Henry Moore had been a patient, friend and a great inspiration. He gave himself three years to have his first show, and achieved it, with more to follow. He worked for six years as a sculptor, but wasn't comfortable in the art world or in the position of working to others' commissions.

Over this period he was also busy inventing: a 'magic paintbrush' toy, a disclosing toothbrush, and a baby buggy that can fold down to a tiny size for travelling. This is still under development. 'I'm hoping it's going to be my pension,' he says.

Discovering it was possible to study architecture part time, he enrolled at the University of North London, more with a view to moving his sculpture in a spatial direction than with any intention of becoming a practising architect. He spent nine years training and doing postgraduate qualifications and professional exams. 'I was very persistent - which is important in part-time study - and only three out of the original 60 completed the course,' he said. While studying, he made ends meet by designing dental practices.

His first project was Linda Greenwall's Hampstead practice and his concepts have grown over time and evolved, with the Weymouth Street children's practice, Steve Clement's NHS practice in Birmingham (Clement was awarded the MBE for 'Services to design in the health service'), Paul Tipton's Manchester practice, Malcolm Schaller's Harley Oral Reconstruction Centre, Julian Webber's endodontic practice and many more.

Dental design

'We only do two or three dental practices per year, but I choose my clients carefully. They have to be forward thinking, interested in design principles, infection control, and ergonomics,' he said. What you'll notice straight away with Richard's dental surgeries is the lack of clutter and work surface area. Other than the dental chair, there is just a single glass shelf, under which are housed Richard's own design trolleys for the dentist to place instruments and items such as a keyboard or mouse, but none of the usual kitchen style cabinetry around the walls. Everything is hidden away behind sleek cupboards, ensuring that the entire surgery is easy not only to clean but to be seen to be clean - in fact sterile. 'The less you have in the surgery, the less there is to clean,' he says. The moveable trolley means that the scheme is very flexible and the dentist can have everything wherever he wants it, not where the architect/designer has placed it. Extensive use of glass and innovative lighting opens up the space, so that patients don't feel shut in, even when the surgery is quite small.

As well as the twin-surgery principle, his trademark 'Steri-walls' feature in his dental surgeries, a 'wall' of cabinets that divide the surgery from the sterilisation area, and which can be accessed from both sides. The dentist can therefore place dirty instruments in one side and they can be removed for cleaning and be restocked by the nurse on the other side without needing to enter the surgery. All the clutter that is so often stored in drawers in the surgery to gather dust can also be kept outside in the central sterilisation area, which also creates a corridor for staff to move around the practice separately from patients. Separate circulation of patients and staff within the practice is a central part of Richard's designs, as are transitional zones to help reduce patient's anxiety at being 'summoned' to the dentist.

Reflections

Richard has made a few poor decisions along the way, the worst being to become a name at Lloyds, a move he made when he was giving up dentistry, to look after his family, as he thought. 'It was on the advice of a very famous patient associated with the royal family, but it turned out to be a disaster. Still, there's life after Lloyds.' The career change was a good decision, though he has no regrets about his initial career choice. 'I enjoyed dentistry till the moment I finished. I had a fabulous practice but I just felt I had only one life and had to make the most of it,' he says. 'I'm sure I'm richer in mind, if not in pocket, for having had that 20-year journey.'

I don't miss the dentistry, but I do miss the patients and my staff. I had a really good team.'

Advice

Richard has strong views on the future of dentistry. 'I honestly believe dentistry is an anachronism. It's mostly unnecessary because most dentistry is iatrogenic - dentistry begets dentistry. I can't believe we'll be doing fancy restorative work in 40 years' time,' he argues. 'There will always be a place for orthodontics or repair of accidental damage, but periodontal disease and caries should be preventable.'

'The new materials we are using now are not as technique sensitive as the old ones, such as gold or even amalgam, and hence not nearly as satisfying to work with. Dentists' job satisfaction is being eroded and they are being sidelined to bleaching and veneers, but that won't last for ever,' he predicts. As for Botox and facial aesthetics: 'That's just picking up the snippets from doctors - it's not the way dentistry should go forward.'

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What now?

Richard's architecture practice is going from strength to strength, designing a range of new builds, including a controversial 'eco-home' in Hampstead and a block of apartments in St Johns Wood. The firm is six strong - all architects, no secretaries or receptionists. 'We all do everything,' he says. 'I'm still learning, building the practice and excited about new types of architecture; and architecture is the most amazing art.'

'If you become a professional architect you can appreciate architecture more and the horizons are much higher than in dentistry. It's a bigger pond. I was a top dentist but I will never be the top architect, so there's more to strive for.'

Fact File

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