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Design Within

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Volkswagen's US Headquarters Reflects Corporate Culture
Stylish Medical Offices Ease the Pain of Going to the Doctor
Stairs and Lobbies Get Their Due

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ON THE COVER: The lobby at 1801 K Street, NW, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.
Photo © Eduard Hueber/archphoto.com

An angled, purple band cuts a swath through the offices of M2 Dentistry.

Photo by Geoffrey Hodgdon

Prescription for Design:

New Medical Offices Counter Stereotypes

by Denise Liebowitz

A visit to the doctor used to mean uncomfortable metal furniture, threadbare carpeting, and atrocious overhead fluorescent lighting. *If the waiting room is this bad, what is the examining room going to be like?* Today, more and more doctors, dentists, and other health care specialists understand that healing begins at the office door. "Doctors know that patients need to be comfortable when they walk in," said **Andreas Charalambous, AIA,** principal of **FORMA Design.** "It creates anxiety when we come in dreading the treatment and dreading the environment. Doctors want their offices to express who they are and reflect the high quality of their care."

Charalambous should know. Health care office design has been an important part of his practice since he established it more than 15 years ago. Three recent FORMA Design projects reflect the requirements of different medical practices, the personalities of the doctors, and the patient populations they serve.

The sleek waiting area includes a flat-screen television.

Photo by Geoffrey Hodgdon

Many health care professionals rely on medical equipment vendors to design their space. "They say 'buy all your equipment from us and we'll do the lay out of your office for free,'" explained Charalambous. "This happens especially in dentists' offices that are very equipment-driven, but it's cookie-cutter design." But as a specialist in health care interiors, Charalambous said, "We know the equipment really well. We can help doctors identify the equipment they need and what it looks like. And we can coordinate with several vendors to get exactly what they need instead of relying on a single source. We don't have allegiance to one specific equipment firm, and we can get the client exactly what he needs."

Kid-Friendly Dentistry

What Dr. Maria Meliton of **M2 Dentistry** wanted was something "unique and unexpected." This office in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was a second location for Dr. Meliton's pediatric dental practice. Her first office layout was drafted by designers from a dental supply company. "The space is functional and nice, but I always felt that it didn't fully grasp my sense of style and aesthetics." For the second office she wanted "a space that was modern, yet warm and inviting…one that appealed to children as well as older teenagers." What she really *didn't* want was an office with a theme like Disneyland or Sea World.

What she got was 2,000 square feet of sophisticated, hip, and functional design. Vibrant color defines a long narrow space that is organized into public and private zones that flank a dividing central spine and corridor. The layout provides efficient flow, eliminates corridor bottlenecks, and accommodates accompanying parents. And there is plenty of room for an entire wall of flat-screen televisions with interactive video games in the reception area and more big screens tuned to kid-friendly videos in the treatment rooms. Glass walls provide sound privacy for the dentists while they are in their offices, but enable them to view the entire space at a glance in case they are needed anywhere in the office. Halogen lighting keeps the office bright and cheery in spite of limited windows.

The new office, which was built by Wohlsen Construction with MM Architects, Inc., as architects of record, had some additional benefits that even Dr. Meliton and her partners did not expect. "We originally designed the office with cabinetry to house actual dental charts. As we were installing digital radiography and multiple computer stations, [we wondered] why were we bothering with paper charts—why don't we just go paperless? So that's what we did!" They ditched the file cabinets and now view radiographs on computers from anywhere in the office as well as remotely, and can even check patient X-rays on their iPhones.

"We love to see the look on people's faces when they walk through the front door. There's often that look of surprise inevitably followed by 'Wow!' From a marketing standpoint, the office design has been a blessing."

Serenity for Skin Patients

For a skin cancer surgeon launching his practice in Waldorf, Maryland, the office design offered by his building's base architect resulted in the same bland, generic interior that Dr. Meliton experienced when her equipment supply company designed her first office. "I realized I wanted a specialist in health care office design," said Dr. George Verghese of **Mid-Atlantic Skin Surgery Institute.** "Andreas showed us some of his medical office work and we really liked what he was offering. Patients worried about skin care are already apprehensive coming in, and they automatically relax in this space…it's calm, serene, and peaceful."

This 5,000-square-foot dermatology clinic, for which HBW Group served as contractor, houses six surgical rooms, five exam rooms, two waiting areas, as well as offices, laboratories, and nurses' and reception areas. Much of the design was driven by the lab-intensive nature of skin cancer surgery, in which easy access to lab facilities from each operating room is an important functional requirement. Also, there are significant waiting periods during the procedure as cell samples are analyzed in the labs. For waiting patients, the surgery suites are spacious and equipped with flat-screen TVs and XM radio. A special waiting room near the surgical area is designated for accompanying family members and has plenty of cappuccino on hand.

The design takes advantage of the second-story corner location with natural light from tall windows flooding interior treatment rooms and corridors. A soothing waterfall in the reception area, sandblasted interior glass walls, and shots of color on a neutral background all help stressed patients relax.

"It doesn't feel closed in; it's light and clean, and when people come in here, they comment how different this is from any other doctor's office they know," said Dr. Verghese.

Design as Branding

So, in this era of boutique medicine, are medical practices adopting marketing strategies previously honed in the hospitality and retail industries? "Good design helps doctors brand themselves," according to Charalambous. "Just as we are seeing changes in the caliber of high-end restaurants, well-designed health care offices are now seen to reflect the high standards of the doctors who

occupy them." In addition to architecture and interior design, Charalambous's firm offers full branding services: web site design and graphic design of letterhead, business cards, marketing materials, and signage.

A Chevy Chase dental implant specialist has embraced Charalambous's branding concepts with enthusiasm. "FORMA Design helped me create a complete brand identity for my practice. They provided a single source for everything: from the planning and the architecture, to working with equipment vendors I had selected, designing the logo, the graphics, web site, signage, and furnishings throughout, down to the accessories," explained Dr. Youssef Obeid of **Obeid Dental.** In fact, Charalambous worked with Dr. Obeid from the very outset, helping to select the office location and construction contactor, and consulting with equipment vendors.

Occupying a coveted ground-level corner location in a high-rise office building on Connecticut Avenue, Obeid Dental enjoys a commanding street presence. The FORMA-designed logo (the name of the practice strikingly rendered in the Braille alphabet) is large-scale and distinctive in exterior signage and sets the tone for this state-of-the art dental office. Office manager Laura Thursh recalled the practice's launch party last October: "It was at night, and the blue glow of the sign and from the inside made it look like some kind of cool nightclub."

The practice, which specializes in cosmetic dentistry, is housed in 1,600 square feet of space that includes a reception area, consultation center, exam rooms, and laboratory facilities. "The kind of dentistry that goes on here is all about precision and perfection," said Charalambous. "The space needs to reflect that." Abundant daylight streaming in from all directions highlights the contrast of highly polished surfaces and the rough texture of a dramatic stone wall. The paperless, all-digital office features a resin desk in the reception area, a sleek stainless steel room divider, and an airy aura of fastidious cleanliness. "I wanted an ultra-modern design that is classic and vibrant, and I wanted to stay away from the sterile and cold concept that some modern offices have," explained Dr. Obeid.

Because some procedures require female patients to arrive makeup-free, a Zen-like restroom, complete with spacious vanity

The entry (top) and main waiting area at the Mid-Atlantic Skin Surgery Institute create a spa-like atmosphere.

Photo by Geoffrey Hodgdon

and movie-star lighting, is provided for quick touch-ups before returning to work. A conference room accommodates plenty of high-tech equipment to help patients visualize various treatments and results, as well as a top-of-the-line espresso machine. To ensure patient privacy, the street-facing treatment rooms are equipped with light-filtering sun screens. Capitol Construction and Cad-Con Consulting, Inc., were the contractors for the project.

In explaining why he invested so much effort in the look of his practice, Dr. Obeid said, "A dental office is a place that people associate with discomfort; we have to work to create an environment where our patients feel comfortable and special. When the architect and dentist spend so much time on the details, patients can anticipate the level of care they will receive. The office created a splash when it opened, and people are still talking about the details, the high-end dental equipment, the coffee machine, and the audio system. We have something for everyone."

FORMA Design's work on these three health care offices has been received with enthusiasm by the professional architecture and interior design community. The Northern Virginia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects recognized the designs of both Obeid Dental and M2 Dentistry with its Jurors Special Citation Awards in Interior Architecture and commended FORMA Design for "a body of work that raises the bar for small medical suite design." In 2009 the International Interior Design Association recognized Obeid Dental with its Gold Award in the health care category and M2 Dentistry with its Silver Award in the same competition.

Oval lighting recesses in the ceiling help to define the main waiting area.

Bold, angled wall planes line the main corridor at Obeid Dental.

The exterior features signage designed by the architect.

The restroom includes a vanity where patients may apply make-up after their procedures.

All photos by Geoffrey Hodgdon