

Dental Office Renovations Needn't Be Painful

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by Deborah Levison

Sometimes there needs to be some drilling — and maybe even hammering — before the first patient sits in the chair.

The design of a dental office in today's world must be more than simply efficient for the dentist. Just as in a fine restaurant, luxury hotel, or exclusive boutique, the ambience of a dental office has become increasingly key in patient retention and the willingness of patients to maintain regular visits.

Leigh Overland Architects has built and renovated dental offices around Connecticut. The designs dispel the archetypal sterile spaces of the past and replace them instead with warmth and functionality for patients, dentists, and their staffs

“Of course, every dentist wants a workspace that is maximally efficient,” says Overland. “But the office needs to be inviting and pleasant, and soothing to a patient who may find himself or herself facing an anxiety-ridden experience.”

Overland's turnkey operation combines a design/build team — architect, builder, cabinet maker, equipment supplier — and implements a vision that makes sense considering the dentist's location, staffing, aesthetics, and budget. He says one of his primary concerns is ensuring that dentists can easily obtain municipal permits and do not run into any obstacles during the building process ... and, all the while, limit construction costs.

Overland often partners with dental equipment suppliers — the companies who manufacture everything from X-ray equipment to sinks and chairs — to which dentists turn when first furnishing their new office or upgrading their existing equipment. These suppliers have begun to offer their customers a design and blueprints for their office. The plans do a good job of accommodating the equipment, says Overland, and are often a good jumping-off point for a more comprehensive plan, which incorporate the elements needed to satisfy any local building requirements.

The inclination for some dentists to use the equipment suppliers' plans rather than start with an individualized custom design in some cases may actually be helpful, Overland says. “The supplier will often suggest the doctor call me to partner with them in continuing the design process by revising or adding to the existing plans and tweaking them wherever necessary to achieve the desired effect.”

While supplier plans may be inexpensive at purchase time, in most cases they come with a heavier cost later on if they do not pass inspection and during construction. If that happens, Overland notes, there can be significant, unexpected expense and annoying time delay.

Another detail to remember is that a dental office requires a great deal of cabinet work, such as in the receptionist's area, in addition to what an equipment supplier is able to provide.

Is it worth the additional cost to bring in a designer along with using the suppliers' plans? Yes, the architect says, when, on average, everything included in the cost of a small one-man office could cost over a million dollars.

“New equipment in a dental office typically costs \$150,000 to \$350,000,” he explains. “Cabinets alone can be \$25,000 to \$75,000. Carpeting, walls, and furnishings range from \$200,000 to \$500,000. If you are paying that much for a renovation, why not pay a fraction more for an upscale design that will save tremendously on cost overruns in the long run, while providing the joy of a great interior?” asks Overland. “It is highly cost effective to involve a professional designer from the outset, using a team approach that will pave the way for a smooth outcome.”

“It's hard to convince some people upfront that they will recoup the architectural fees many times over. And how do you put a value on the enjoyment factor and the elimination of construction stress and change orders?” Overland asks. “This is an environment where a dentist will spend eight hours or more a day, five days or more a week. It is a second home as well as a business. It's a question of having a new office that's good for your equipment, and one that you and your patients will enjoy for the next 20 years.”

About Leigh Overland: Leigh Overland, architect, AIA, NCARB, is located in Danbury, Conn. In addition to dental and medical office design, he also is known for upscale residential, commercial and religious projects with an eye toward green architecture. His work was featured in a recent episode of ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." He has won numerous awards, including one for the renovation of his own home by the Westport Historic Preservation Trust. Contact him by phone at (203) 794-9001 or visit the Web site at www.LDOverland.com.

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