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Double visionary

A small office space was converted into a bright and pragmatic practice in this award-winning design. By **Kerryn Ramsey**

When Tony Hill was relocating his dental practice in Hobart, he decided to do something different with the interior design. The new space needed to be efficient yet patients should feel comfortable and welcomed as soon as they entered. It was to be a calm, beautiful space with no stark white walls, no bland furniture and no references to teeth, smiles or brushes.

He found his future practice in an old Education Department building. “It was a stripped-out office and not a lot else—just an empty space with a few internal dividing walls,” says Dr Hill. There were a few things in its favour though. It was well situated

Above and right: Dr Hill wanted his practice to be stylish but efficient, given the limited staff and small space.

in the centre of Hobart with much better parking than his old building. The office also had a view of the mountains and the cost of the lease was within his budget.

Dr Hill turned to the design team at Liminal Spaces in Hobart. He already knew one of the partners, Elvio Brianese, extremely well—in fact, Brianese was a patient of Dr Hill’s. Peta Heffernan, the principal of Liminal Spaces, and architect Jeremy Holloway also became involved in creating Dr Hill’s dental surgery from scratch.

“Tony was a brilliant client,” says Heffernan. “He wanted something stylish and welcoming but his major concern was with the efficiencies of the practice. As long as we addressed



the pragmatics, we were able to be creative in the design.” The new office was only 100 square metres in size so Heffernan intended to use all the tricks of the trade to make it look and feel more spacious.

Dr Hill is the only dentist on staff and the receptionist works double duty by looking after all the sterilisation. The efficiency of the space was maximised so she is able to complete her behind-the-scenes work while retaining a view of the desk and waiting room. Dr Hill also employs a dental assistant and a hygienist.

Two surgeries were set up side by side with an interview room between them. “It was really important I had a small office where I could speak to patients away from the clinic environment,” says Dr Hill. The design allows for him to move between the surgeries without going into the public areas. A third surgery is used solely by the hygienist.

All three surgeries are bounded by opaque glass walls. This allows outside light into the waiting area and reception that are both internal rooms. The glass walls make the space feel larger while retaining privacy for patients in the surgeries.

For the interior, Heffernan drew inspiration from a mosaic

Quote

Dr Tony Hill, Hobart

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facade on the front elevation of the building. Created by Tasmanian artist Max Angus in the late '50s, the mosaic was very Mondrian in its design. “We wanted to bring in something that had a bit of meaning and would provide the conceptual framework for how the spaces were divided,” says Heffernan. They worked around the existing mechanical systems, reused some of the light fittings and recycled as much as possible. Following the lineal aspect of the mosaic, the space was divided using a rectangular grid.

It's the colour palette, however, that gives the practice its unique look. Chocolate brown and burnt orange—a combination possibly never seen in a dental surgery before—provides a calming ambience with a slightly retro feel. While not reproducing the exact colours of the facade, the retro element stems from that dramatic artwork.

While Heffernan was certain that the colour combination would work, she was slightly apprehensive when presenting it to Dr Hill. “We had put a lot of thought into it,” says Heffernan, “and Dr Hill bought his wife Teresa along to get a second opinion.” There was no need to worry, though. As soon as they saw it, Dr Hill and Teresa loved the concept and approved the colour scheme.

A dramatic chocolate-coloured wall dominates the waiting area with low, chunky and very comfortable seating along its base. A soft lineal light washes down the wall and orange stripes recede down the hallway. The flooring design pays homage to the Angus mosaic and the feel is one of spaciousness. The cold clinical aspect of most surgeries has been successfully



The design allows the receptionist to see the front desk while performing behind-the-scenes work.

eliminated from this elegant practice.

Heffernan was also very aware that the space needed a high level of cleanliness. “We avoided fussy detailing because that can be a collection point for dirt and dust,” explains Heffernan. All three surgeries are built with clean, simple lines and have no unnecessary ledges. Each surgery has an inbuilt seat for carers, children or parents to watch proceedings. This unobtrusive seating fits seamlessly into the room. Everything can be cleaned down easily while the simple lines and sleek styling reduces visual noise.

The result of all this hard work has been an overwhelming success. The Tony Hill Dental practice received an Australian Institute of Architects (Tasmania chapter) interior architecture commendation in 2012. It’s also been shortlisted for the national Interior Design Excellence Award. “You don’t expect those kind of awards for a dental surgery,” says Heffernan, who is undoubtedly chuffed. “We were up against snazzy cafes and moody wine bars. It’s a bit of a first for a dental surgery to get a look in. We are really happy.”

And as Dr Hill says, “It’s certainly come up trumps. I’ve had very positive responses from all my patients.”

It’s often said of medical practitioners that they don’t like to spend too much money on the front-of-house in case their patients think that’s why everything is so expensive. This has undoubtedly kept a vast number of surgeries looking a little on the bland side. Peta Heffernan, however, has a different view. “I’m a big believer that the space impacts on your wellbeing and your psychology—so I hope there’s a shift to making surgeries less hostile and clinical. I’m very thankful that we had a client like Tony who is a bit of a visionary.” □