



# Marble marvel

A marble-clad exterior is just one of the awe-inspiring elements in this newly designed practice in the Melbourne suburb of Beaumaris.  
**By Kerry Ramsey**



A three-storey building clad in white glazed marble (opposite and this page, top) comprises a four-surgery practice (below left), three-bedroom apartment (below right) and a dental lab.



It's common for diligent dentists to refer to their practices as a 'home away from home', but for Dr Valence (Val) Roberts, his surgery and residence are beautifully entwined. His private apartment is directly above his recently built surgery.


Located in Beaumaris, 20 kilometres southeast of Melbourne, the bc dental practice has been recently transformed into a beacon of style and substance. Its visionary design, high-tech equipment and thoughtful functionality and ergonomics have been embraced by Dr Roberts and his team of seven practitioners. But the real coup is the inviting courtyard that can be viewed from most of the surgeries and his third-floor apartment.

"It looks fantastic," says the dentist. "The first place where I worked had neon lights and no windows in the room. I felt like I was in a jail cell all day. To be able to look out onto the

garden—with a lawn, lavender and chilli plants—is really cool."

This outdoor zone also explains why he's decided to stay put in the three-bedroom apartment, despite a few 'unexpected' events during the construction time. In the early stages, Dr Roberts envisaged moving into his hip bachelor pad above the practice, but by the time the build was completed, he was married with a one-year-old daughter. His wife and daughter, fortunately, have no desire to leave the apartment. "Sometimes my daughter will come out and play on the grass while I'm working. It's such a nice environment. I can also visit my family at lunchtime, even if I only have a half hour off."

Family is certainly a priority in Dr Roberts' life—his dedication to the profession comes directly from his father. Dr Carlo Robert graduated in dentistry from Wits University in Johannesburg, South Africa, back in 1975, then moved to London, and finally



The solid building is “representative of the work we do”, says Dr Val Roberts.



## Quote

Craig Barkla, design architect of Demaine Partnership

“We looked at what they do as a craft and that led us towards a very polished veneer of white glazed marble flush to the glass.”

14

settled in Australia in 1981, working in the original two-surgery practice in Beaumaris. “Just after I bought Dad’s practice, the property next door became available,” explains Dr Roberts who had previously worked on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast for a few years. “So we bought that and decided to redevelop the whole property.”

Now a three-storey 670-square-metre structure, the four-surgery practice is located on the ground floor, and a commercial dental lab, The Smile Laboratory, is about to open on the first floor early next year.

When Drs Val and Carlo Roberts commissioned design architect Craig Barkla of Demaine Partnership to reconstruct the two shopfronts, they had compiled a concise brief. “We wanted it to be clean, edgy and contemporary,” says Val. “It needed to reflect our practice philosophy and how we treat our patients. It needed to be timeless; not a building that would be dated in five years’ time.”

When it came to the aesthetics, however, Barkla was given free rein on the design and materials of the practice. “We

looked at what they do as a craft and that led us towards a very polished veneer of white glazed marble flush to the glass. The marble has a degree of translucency, and the glass at certain times of the day looks opaque so from an oblique view, it looks almost solid,” he says.

Val appreciates the value of the marble-clad exterior. “It has come up beautifully and it’s not high maintenance. When you take pride in your work, your building needs to reflect that.”

When designing the interior, Barkla was keen not to make the building look too clinical. “We used timber internally to soften things,” he says. “It was about finding a balance between the very contemporary look and providing a space that wasn’t imposing, so the scale of the space internally is quite domestic.”

Barkla worked with dental design consultancies to ensure the layout of the practice was functional, while Dr Roberts also commissioned Sam Russell from Create Dental in the later stages of the fit-out to ensure the final touches were perfect.

During the construction and fit-out period, Barkla also worked closely with the father-and-son dentists, as well as their new full-time dentist Dr Terry Honeysett who’s worked with Carlo since their student days in Johannesburg. As Val recalls, designing a functional surgery fit-out wasn’t as easy as he expected. “I wanted large spacious rooms but you don’t want the room to be





**Entertainment options help keep patients calm.**

too big. We did many, many outlays of how to set up the practice and now we're really happy with what we've got."

Barkla concurs: "We managed to pack quite a lot of program into a fairly compact space. It's amazing the degree of detail in positioning the equipment and the joinery. We also made sure the ceiling heights were generous so when you are in the chair, you don't feel like the ceiling is weighing down upon you."

Barkla also included a clever future-proofing option for when the dental chairs need to be replaced. The concrete directly under the chair is a different mix that can be easily removed to adjust the pipework required for a different type of chair.

One specific request came from Carlo, who's been specialising in treating nervous patients for the past 30 years. He made sure the TV screens installed on the ceilings have subtitles and wireless headphones so the noise doesn't distract the dentist and dental nurse. "We went to a lot of trouble to locate the TVs so they wouldn't be obstructed by the light," explains Barkla, who was so impressed with the practice, he's now a patient of bc dental. As an extra bonus, patients can also select suitable music through Spotify, an online subscription music service.

The building was finally completed in late 2011 and although the project exceeded the initial budget, Val was delighted to both live and work in his new property. "Since it was a complicated build, it took more time and money than we ever expected," he says. But overall, he's still excited about living and working in this highly lauded practice. Apart from being short-listed in the Australian Institute of Architects Awards' Commercial Buildings division, it's been published in architectural magazines in Australia, Korea, China, Poland and the US.

"It's a beautiful building and it's going to be here for a long time," says Dr Val Roberts. "It is representative of the work we do here and the direction and commitment that we are giving to our dentistry." □

