

Chatting to...Richard Mitzman

The editor visits him at Malcolm Schaller's newly designed implant practice in Harley Street

“ALL dentists accumulate clutter, and the greater the work surface available, the more they will make nests for themselves.” No, not another of those annoying little attacks launched upon us by the popular press, but the feelings of one of our own; the views indeed of arguably Britain's most controversial designer of dental surgeries. We were in Malcolm Schaller's startlingly different new Harley Street implant practice, with its designer, Richard Mitzman BDS DDS and now RIBA, voicing his thoughts.

Traditional surgery designs, he insists, are little more than tedious U or L-shaped variations of glorified kitchen cabinetry. They invariably surround the chair, with their vast areas of uninviting flat surface attracting only mess. This sort of thing is unacceptable given the necessary sterility of the clinical environment nowadays, and becomes doubly so as the notions of strict infection control filter slowly into general practice. Minimalisation is the answer; negligible work surfaces, of course, with any secondary areas required coming only from mobile trolleys tucked away out of sight most of the time. Two of these “minimalistic” surgeries, “Mitzmanistic” might be a more appropriate name, should always be at the disposal of every dentist, thus ensuring that even the small amounts of time spent cleaning and disinfecting between patients is not wasted as the surgeon darts just next door to a previously cleaned and identical environment. These saved minutes can mount up over a year.

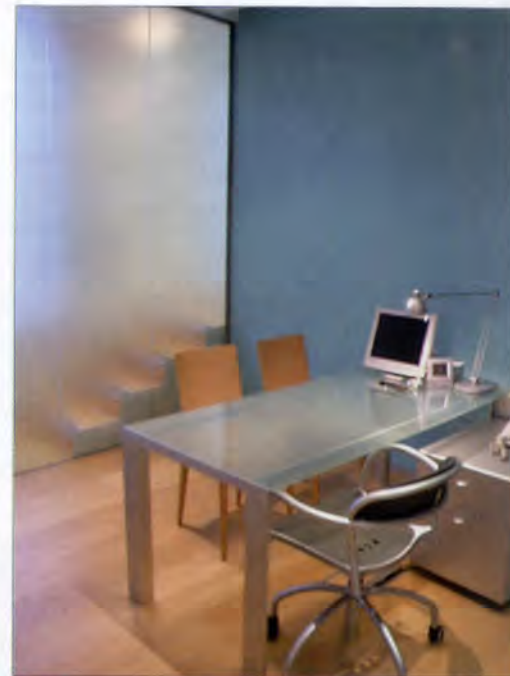
In a nutshell, this is the Mitzman philosophy, and as we moved round

the mind-blowing Schaller set-up – the latest of the designer's marque – the telltale signs of Mitzmanism were obvious. An original steel-framed building is invariably the answer to a prayer for avant-garde surgery designers, as all existing walls can be torn down without risk, leaving the total floor area free to be re-divided into whatever is decided. In Malcolm Schaller's Harley Street classic, fortunately housed in a steel-framed shell, all the Mitzman trademarks are on show. The peripheral window corridor running round the edge of the practice for patient access to the surgeries, first seen in his Birmingham creation, is used again here. It serves as “route one” in the Mitzman dual circulation idea, with the original windows in this case looking dramatically northwards over Marylebone Road. On the opposite side of this corridor are the surgery front walls. Built simply of 12mm sliding frosted glass sheets, they transmit borrowed light deep into each operatory.

Inside each surgery, at its head so to speak, is another designer brainwave, the “steri wall”. This is perhaps half a metre thick, and is in fact a “wall” composed of double-doored cupboards. All instruments and materials can be placed in these from service and sterilisation areas to the rear, and removed as required via the “front door” in the surgery. No one needs enter or leave for this exchange, so the “no clutter” rules



Reception



Malcolm's consulting screens



Steri-walls

remain intact. The one and only fixed work surface in a surgery is also attached to this wall. Formed out of thick transparent glass, it is both easy

to clean and, just as importantly, always looks so. It is minimally wide, needless to say, but comes complete with wash basin and ingeniously also

serves as a discrete “garage” for the accessory trolleys and waste bin.

On the non-surgery side of the “steri wall” lies the engine room of the practice. A place for stores, and where sterilisation is carried out. This area, “route two” of the dual communication channels, also allows nurses – dentists as well I expect – to flit about the practice behind the scenes, appearing as if by magic in the appropriate place, just at the crucial moment.

To traditional eyes, these ultra modern surgeries always come as a surprise, looking at first sight little more than stark soulless cubicles. Extraordinarily, the traditional “ten by ten” idea of yesteryear still more or less lives on as the perfect surgery size, as these measure 9.5 feet by 12.5; just a little larger in area perhaps, but not a lot in it. After a short while, affection for their sheer transparency and simplicity begins to grow, enhanced by the delicate pastel shades of the green and blue

decor, and the strikingly yellow warm glow of the semi-transparent front walls. Other old traditions, however, may still take a while to die, as Malcolm confided that he still actually liked his biggest surgery best, the one with real windows!

Computers are rife throughout the whole practice; far too complicated to explain or for me to understand. Suffice to say there are two monitors in every surgery, one on the chair, and the other on the "steri wall" at the back. The consulting rooms, too, have their screens. Talking of which, the Mitzman grand plan dictates that dentists should always possess a consulting room in addition to their two surgeries. It is a place away from the clinical atmosphere where medical records can be taken and confidences exchanged. In its own special way, believes the designer, this room can be as productive as any surgery!

Round every corner in this unique practice one comes across little instances of Mitzman thinking. The elegant curved reception desk adjoining a tiny but somehow spacious-looking waiting area. The instrument washing-up machine, one of only two in the country, which leaves instruments with a rare sparkle they tell me. The ingenious juxtaposition of two sliding doors which can be closed at clever angles to divide a recovery room. And in one surgery, a bizarre scrubbing-up sink, a vast glass affair which must be like washing your hands in a fruit bowl. By contrast, underneath and in full view, even fancy stainless piping cannot quite disguise that a U-bend is still only a U-bend!

Later in the afternoon we repaired for a congenial "cuppa" amidst the splendour of the RIBA building in

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Portland Place. Richard had steered me in the direction of his new "club" as he laughingly put it, and it was very clear that he revelled in the achievement of his latest ambition to be an architect. Significantly, RIBA Dip Arch comes first before the dental letters on his card, although despite this he still enjoys being Dr Richard!

After qualifying BDS in 1967, taking a DDS in California, and then a very successful practice in the West End, he gave up dentistry in 1987 to study – now wait for it – yes, sculpture, and in Italy too. Among his patients in London had been a certain Henry Moore, who no doubt had some bearing on this rather abrupt career change, although one feels dentistry was by then no longer presenting the right kind of challenge for the creative mind. Four years and several exhibitions later he returned to England for another change of direction, this time the study of architecture, an interest which looms very large indeed in this extraordinarily talented man's life.

Sitting there chatting over our tea, he told me in his matter of fact way that he had always found dentistry easy. It was no boast, with the remark being made in much the same way others would tell you that they found, say, juggling came easy; a simple confident statement of fact and I accepted it as such. Many I'm sure do not, and certainly his views on many topics tend to be fairly dogmatic, but Richard Mitzman, apart from his varied creative talents, also has the strength of character to remain convinced always of the rightness of his views, with no obvious self doubts apparent. Some would call this sheer arrogance, but



A sculpture (arched back) and sketch (del pei) taken from the talented Richard Mitzman's oeuvre



I prefer to attribute the characteristic to just the same genes which produce the rest of the character, the ingenuity, the lateral thinking, and the creativity. For people built in this way, the whole package goes together, with an almost ruthless sense of purpose being necessary for survival. Dr Mitzman is absolutely certain that his concepts for the practice of dentistry are right, and is quite prepared to wait until the rest of us see it his way.

In architecture, this uniquely talented rolling stone of a personality has probably at last found a true "home", although I have to say I can't quite see him sticking with the small beer of dental surgeries for too long.

