



This won't hurt a bit

The light and lively design of Toronto's Bloor West Dental Group eases the stress of a trip to the dentist.

—By Rhys Phillips



Overleaf and above Opposing views of the clinic's reception area, gloriously transparent and filled with natural light. An organic-shaped walnut reception desk, topped with white quartz, curves along the limestone-clad wall. **Left** Rear and basement operatories are accessed through a glass-enclosed stairway. **Right** A recessed acoustic walnut panel over each operator chair decreases noise and connects to the wood detailing in the reception area.

Thanks to advances in dentistry, most procedures now involve minimum pain. Even so, "dentist-trip anxiety" lingers. But just as evidence-based medicine has prompted evidence-based hospital design, dental offices are recognizing that design impacts significantly both patient well-being and recovery.

The shift, however, from earlier aesthetically sterile, above-ground dental offices with asbestos tiles, clinical metal furniture and hard fluorescent light to quality accommodative environments has not been universal. Dr. Carolyn Poon Woo's experience working in generic and only marginally comfortable offices located frequently on, but blind to, the street motivated her to contemplate whether she really wanted to spend the rest of her professional career in relatively dreary, hermetically contained environments. Bloor West Dental Group on

Toronto's premier retail street is her answer. The work of G. Bruce Stratton Architects with Stephanie Kamburis of the firm's affiliated Southside Design, this rethink of the "idea of design for anxiety" as Stratton puts it, provides a very transparent and light-intensive twist to the idea of a storefront practice.

The starting point was a rather dilapidated, 22-foot-wide, 120-foot-deep single-storey store sandwiched between two moderately taller buildings. The idea, says Stratton, was to create a calm, almost tranquil environment in both the reception area and the 11 "operatories" that stretch toward the back. Perhaps counter-intuitively, they rejected the idea of closed-off seclusion opting instead to make the original, slightly raised first floor of the clinic's generous reception area a sort of stage from which to see and be seen.

The first step was to rip off the building's facade and replace it with an unbroken plane of 14-foot-high glass panes stitched together only by stainless-steel spider connectors and framed by two pilasters of Owen Sound limestone. A copper soffit over the door on the left side provides additional natural material, as Stratton wanted a clean, refined and elegant face but without too much "Miesian slickness." Once inside and up a glass-enclosed, gently ascending ramp, the clinic's reception area is confirmed as gloriously transparent and filled with natural light. "Imagine someone with inevitable subconscious fears and anxiety," says Stratton, "gradually relaxing through the distraction of being connected to an animated street, attuned to outside weather and aware of changing urban light conditions."



An organic-shaped reception desk panelled in rich walnut with a white quartz countertop curves along the opposite, limestone-clad wall. The counter serves as both a wayfinding indicator to the rear operatories while also setting apart the waiting area. Overhead, above the reception desk, run six walnut-clad beams or ribs connected to an equal number of substantive walnut columns that march along part of the street glazing. Recessed between the ribs are backlit red-and-white translucent acrylic panels by 3Form. "As you don't see the panels as you enter," says Stratton, they act as a 'surprise feature' when you sit down."

While eschewing the sensory isolation sought in many spas, the clinic's rich and colourful material palette rendered with a resolutely modern intent deliberately evokes a spa sensibility. In addition to the

flowing wood reception desk, the limestone wall with a recessed niche backlit with LED lighting and large grey porcelain floor tiles, Stratton plays the rigorous linearity of BassamFellows' Tuxedo sofas against the organic sensuality of the iconic Noguchi coffee table.

The rear and basement operatories – the latter accessed through a mullionless glass-enclosed stairway descending through a trapezoid-shaped opening – are balanced between openness and privacy. Over the common service lane on the ground level, a large skylight provides abundant natural light that spills into the individual care units, each defined in part by freestanding glass screens in walnut frames. Blue walls reflect industry studies that suggest this colour is the most calming. A recessed acoustic walnut panel above each chair decreases noise and

connects to the wood detailing in the reception area. A bit of mood lighting through MR 16 lighting fixtures rounds out the drive for tranquility.

Despite its colours, textures, natural light and transparency, Stratton believes the clinic's "minimal design, relying on how the materials all fit together, reflects without a lot of ornament the meticulousness of dentistry." The Bloor West Dental Group successfully combines three functions. It facilitates anxiety reduction, provides an invigorating working environment and acts as an elegant marketing tool. While it may never make going to the dentist one of life's highly anticipated events, it certainly should make the trip at least a little less stressful. ◻