



What a wonderful fit-out

A practice's reputation for clinical excellence is complemented by an imaginative and stylish interior design. **Jeff Megahan** reports.

Optometrist **Richard Vojlay** says he learned three things from renovating his practice: you can't beat good design, you have to know your own limitations, and 19 years is a long time to wait between fit-outs.

For almost two decades, Vojlay developed his practice's reputation for eye care, and Vision Camberwell is recognised for its high level of clinical expertise and professional care. Vojlay freely admits that the expertise was not reflected in the practice's appearance.

Over the years, the reception and retail area of Vision Camberwell began to look impersonal and austere; there was a mismatch between the level of care and the rooms in which it was offered. 'The polite way to describe how it used to look is "tired"', Vojlay said. 'The not so polite way would have been to call it "shabby".'

Vojlay commissioned Nicolina Caia and Tania Di Lizio from Caia Di Lizio Interior Design to address the problem. His brief was very brief: he invited them into the practice and said 'We have to do something.'

The designers could see that the practice was out-dated but the bigger problem was that it looked too much like a clinic. Caia and Di Lizio created a design that would stress the importance of vision and build on that theme to imbue the practice with colour, texture and warmth.

As luck would have it for the designers, Vojlay had recently returned from an optometric conference in Beijing, where he picked up some great advice from a branding specialist: always do the opposite of what your competitors are doing and create an emotional response with your practice environment. That advice became the guiding principle for the renovation of his practice and over the next 18 months, Vision Camberwell would be completely transformed.



Retail

The key to Caia and Di Lizio's design was to change a clinical space into a retail space. 'We thought the practice shouldn't be regarded as just a waiting room,' Caia said. 'It didn't have to look like a clinical area, it should look exciting and inspire people to have a look around, to explore and hopefully, to purchase.'

The reception desk near the front door was moved to the middle of the floor to become the central hub of the retail area. 'We didn't want people to be afraid to come into the shop; we placed the desk in such a way that the receptionist wouldn't be looking straight out the door,' Caia said.

The new U-shaped reception desk is veneered in dark, Madagascar timber and open at the rear, allowing the staff to enter and exit the workspace easily from the back rooms. A

vibrant green floor rug, edged with a cream filigree design featuring butterflies and plants, takes up the middle of the retail area.

Rows of cantilevered glass shelving run along one of the side walls; beneath the shelves are cabinets with the same timber veneer as the reception desk. The white, opposing wall is covered with an ingenious braille pattern. In the rear of the retail area, adjacent to a row of cantilevered white shelves is the contact lens dispensary, separated from the rest of the room by a floor-to-ceiling wing wall covered with synthetic hedge.

Vojlay points to the hedge as a good example of how his practice environment strives to create an emotional response in the patients. 'Going to the optometrist can be a fairly conventional process, so we tried to do something that was a bit unusual,' he said.

Throughout the retail area, a circular motif dominates. It can be seen in the shelving cut into the hedge, the lighting ring above the reception desk, the convex braille pattern on the wall and the bold spherical feet of the cabinetry. Caia explains that the use of the circular motif grew out of the new signature for Vision Camberwell, which incorporates two circles in the logo.

Green and nature play important roles in the remodelled practice. As Caia explained, 'Green is a soothing colour and we often look to nature to soothe our eyes.' A striking counterpoint is red, which makes a bold statement in the imaginative raspberry window display unit but is used subtly in the overhead lighting ring and behind the glowing neon writing on the back wall.

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The consulting rooms could not be as playful and exciting as the retail area but a sense of greater space was created by installing cabinets with a light timber finish.

Pièce de résistance

The neon lighting forms the words from Louis Armstrong's 1969 classic song *What a Wonderful World*: 'I see trees of green and red roses too.' The quotation playfully spotlights the practice's dedication to vision, beauty and nature. It also reflects the owner's interests—Vojlay holds an arts degree in music and is a bit of a jazz aficionado.

Initially, Vojlay rejected the quotation. 'I wanted something a little more exotic, like something from the Dalai Lama, a bit more introspective or meaningful,' he said. After a long search for something more profound, he agreed with the designers. He's glad he did. The simple quote is the feature of the practice that generates most comments. 'People like the reminder because it's the essence of vision,' Vojlay said.

There is heavy pedestrian and vehicle traffic along Burke Road, providing opportunity for passers-by to notice the practice. To ensure that the neon-lit quotation and the practice interior are easily visible from the street, Caia and Di Lizio have cleared the clutter of 1980s graphics and signage from the front window and replaced them with the practice's name in a subtle type face.

Construction process

The fit-out took over six months but due to the experience and creativity of the shopfitters, Select Shopfitting, the practice had to close for only four days. Vojlay says his patients were good-natured about the

renovation and some were excited about it. 'I think the patients, especially the long-standing patients, felt intrigued and involved. They were happy to follow the little map I had out front and come in through the back lane, past the construction vehicles and the guys standing in shorts, and find their seat in the waiting room,' he said.

Vojlay says his practice's reputation for clinical excellence has allowed him to be playful

with the décor. 'We have a high level of clinical expertise here. We do a lot of keratoconus, we do a lot of orthokeratology, we have an OCT, we have retinal cameras, but our high level of expertise wasn't matched by the surroundings,' Vojlay said. 'Now we have something we are really proud of. The comments from the patients, especially the ones we haven't seen in a while, are overwhelmingly positive. They say "Wow, look at this!"' ■





Colour palette

- Dulux Off White
- Dulux Beige Royal
- Porter's Paints Sequin
- Porter's Paints Ecrú



Although the original Art-Deco architecture inspired the interior design scheme as a whole, each room was approached differently.

< landscape. By using stacked stone and timber cladding for the alterations and adding frameless-glass balustrades to terraces and balconies, the new works have a reduced the bulk of the structure and blend into the site."

The final stage saw Daniela enlist interior designer Tania Di Lizio, from Caia Di Lizio, to help with the interiors. "The house was to be practical and workable," says Tania. "Daniela likes to entertain and, with two boys, a large extended family and many friends, she wanted everything to have a place. The original architecture was my inspiration, though each room was approached differently. The two formal rooms [separate living and dining] were done with a hint of the Art Deco and so are moody and more elaborate than the rest of house, which is relaxed, contemporary and airy."

The result is a comfortable home the family relishes every day. Daniela's favourite space is the upstairs retreat, where she has her office as well as her bedroom. From here, she looks out across the garden and surveys another example of Burley Griffin's timeless handiwork – the little park beyond.

H&G
 Architect: Michelle Stephens & Co, Fitzroy North, Vic, 0411 475 202.
 Interior designer: Caia Di Lizio, Ivanhoe, Vic, (03) 9415 7878.

ABOVE The guestroom is furnished with Daniela's special finds. Artwork by Pip Davey. **RIGHT** In the ensuite, marble tiles from Urban Edge Ceramics echo the stacked stone outside. **OPPOSITE TOP** Alex's bedroom. Blind in Romo Earl Stripe from Marco Fabrics. Rug from Customweave Carpets+Rugs. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** The gym and pool area. For Where to Buy, see page 187.

