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Bringing a higher level of patient care was the core concept for the Zenthea Dental Spa. From the hospitality-inspired reception area, a sinuous white wall organized the interior and leads patients to a collection of unique treatment rooms.

An Environment That People Leave With (Bright) Smiles

As Habjan Architecture + Interior Design augmented its residential and commercial base, it found an intriguing hospitality/wellness design hybrid: dental spas

By Kelli Lawrence

Sometimes it's easy to identify what you need for your career to thrive. For Agatha Habjan, the magic words were *client relationship*—the kind she learned to cherish after her start at a small firm, and came to miss after years with a large corporate firm. It was during her days as a design director and design principal for the latter when she had what she calls her “awakening moment.”



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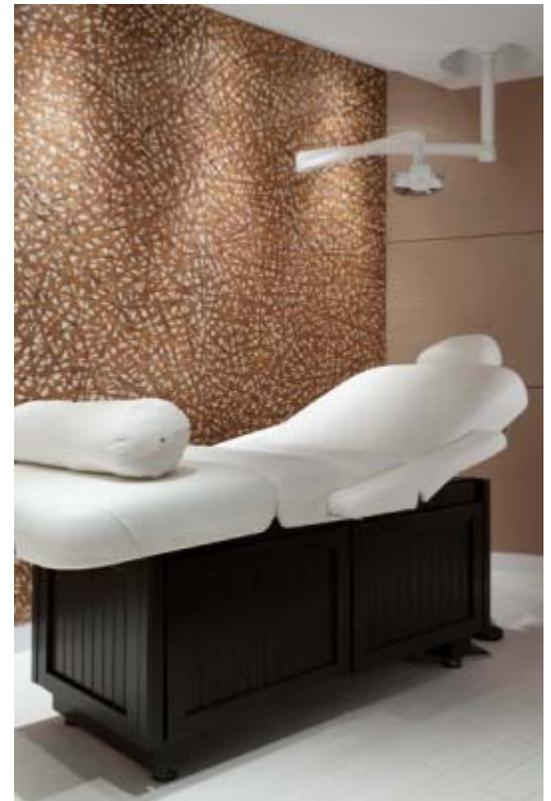
guinea pig?” But if you show the confidence that you have and are passionate about what you do, you can build confidence with the client that this is the most important project you’ll be doing and a ‘fresh-eye’ approach may give them the most innovative design. They could give (the job) to someone who’s done 25 of them ... or to me, who would make it my number-one priority.”

The biggest challenge came with creating so much comfort within a relatively small office space. With a need for four patient rooms, an x-ray area, the spa, offices, and a reception area all within 2,000 square feet, Habjan tapped deep into her well of innovation—as aesthetically noted by the ribbon-like wall that patients follow out of the reception area. Habjan credits a strong collaborative effort with the client for the project’s success. The project was an honoree in *Interior Design* magazine’s Best of the Year 2011 awards. “When a project has a very strong concept, and a big idea behind it, it’s much easier to execute,” she points out. “And when the client buys into the concept/the big idea ... it’s much harder for them to change their minds.” In another case of one project type serving as the bridge to another, Habjan soon found her firm overseeing the design of the Zenthea Dental Spa in midtown Manhattan. Featuring top-of-the-line spa treatments as well as an intimate, highly customizable oral clinic where even the dental tools are kept under wraps until necessary, Habjan greatly enjoyed creating such a uniquely pleasant atmosphere. “The idea is supposed to be that for once, patients have control of their room—the lighting, what sort of music is playing, the room temperature,” she notes. “It’s nice to have that degree of control when someone’s sticking their hand in your mouth.”



“All of [my work] started to become rollout projects—how many workstations, how many offices, how can we do it for a low budget, and so on,” Habjan recalls. “And only once in a while would you get clients who actually cared and were as passionate about the design as we were! So I started to get this itch to work on my own.”

Such a mindset not only secured the emphasis on client relationships that Habjan yearned for, but helped create the strong client base that a fledgling young business dreams of. One repeat customer, Dr. Sonny Oliva, became such after turning to Habjan for help when an ongoing renovation of his dental office (under a different designer) was yielding disappointing results. Although she’d never taken on the dental world directly, she paid close attention to Oliva’s vision and “tweaked” the renovation so that it better reflected the calm, friendly hospitality industry than health care. When the “itch” blossomed into Habjan Architects + Interior Design in 2009, Habjan was ready to diversify and find all of the different niches where the most creative clientele resided. With one new type of project leading into another, wellness and corporate work was among that which eventually found its way into her wheelhouse of expertise—though she had to work even harder than usual to get it there. “There are a lot of clients who will question your lack of experience (in a niche),” she admits. “They’ll wonder ‘Why should I be the



The rooms—each distinguished by its own materials palette—feature highly tactile surfaces of wood bark, mother of pearl, and metal.

With so many strong concepts and big ideas emerging from Habjan and her staff of four, it might seem a little surprising that Habjan can’t name her so-called “dream project,” either already completed or still on the horizon. But



because she tries to treat all projects similarly, regardless of budget, the real dream is in simply growing her business just enough so that she can remain actively involved and committed to all of them. This is likely one more reason she holds her

client relationships in such high regard. “I love a client who really appreciates your time, and how hard you work,” she says. “Having a great relationship with them, pushing each other ... that’s the most important thing.”

Project Credits

General Contractor: 9J Builder

Medical Equipment: Patterson Dental, Living Earth Crafts

Fabrics: Angela Brown LTD

Architectural Wall Systems: Architectural Systems, Inc.

Photography: Sherry Griffin, Manuela Montella

