

one step ahead

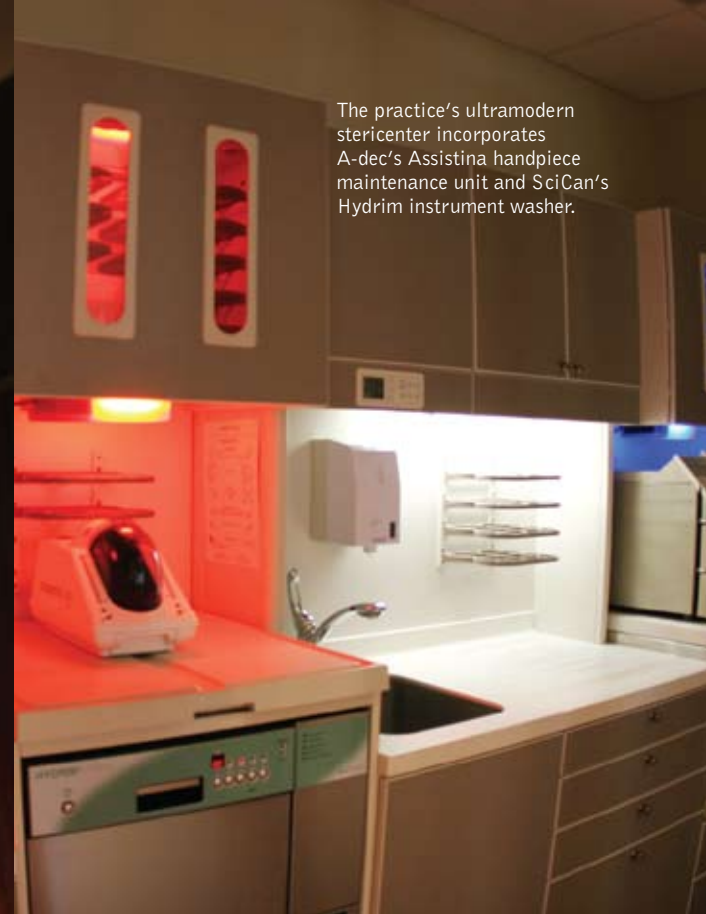
DUNSON
DENTAL • DESIGN

Dr. Bernee Dunson's Atlanta practice was built with an eye toward the future.

When Dr. Bernee Dunson purchased his previous practice, he could already envision where he'd be in a decade. Exactly 10 years and three days later, he moved into Dunson Dental Design, an entirely new boutique practice focused on highly esthetic, reconstructive dentistry. It's just another step in the evolution of Dr. Dunson's career – a career he keeps on track through constant forward thinking.

By the time he was 13, Dr. Dunson knew he was going to be a dentist. After graduating from Morehouse College in 1987, in response to the burgeoning trend toward cosmetic dentistry and his own desire to "embrace both science and art," he headed to the University of Southern California School of Dentistry. "I wanted to be in the epicenter of the cosmetic world," he said.

story: ed kobesky
photos: victor rachael



The practice's ultramodern stericercenter incorporates A-dec's Assistina handpiece maintenance unit and SciCan's Hydrim instrument washer.



Neutral colors, frosted glass, wood-finish flooring and other high-end details combine to create an environment that's subtly upscale.

Though he was one of the first dentists of his generation to anticipate the public's enthusiasm for extreme dental makeovers, he's quick to stress that 'makeover' is not his favorite term. "It's an effective buzzword but it's not reflective of what good restorative dentistry accomplishes, which is reconstructing and simulating nature in a predictable fashion," Dr. Dunson explained. With that in mind, he headed east to complete a Columbia University residency at Harlem Hospital and back to California again, this time for a three-year implant residency at Loma Linda University.

"As a mentor of mine said, you get clarity over time," Dr. Dunson recalled. "In my case, I realized that I wanted to do the best dentistry instead of volume...and I didn't want managerial responsibilities to drag me down." That meant re-imagining his future without the Stone Mountain office. If he was going to do dentistry his way, with a more narrow focus and a more selective patient base, he'd need to find a new location, create a suitable environment and put the right marketing plan in place.

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In 1996, he bought an existing practice focused on cosmetic and TMJ in Stone Mountain, a suburb of Atlanta. It flourished. "My original plan was to maintain the dental center in Stone Mountain and open a satellite office downtown," he explained. When a demographic study revealed that only 50% of his current patients lived in Stone Mountain, this eye-opening statistic left Dr. Dunson wondering whether he should keep the fast-paced office at all. He could, he believed, operate anywhere.



Dr. Dunson with the Benco Dental team. L-R: Shawn Angell (territory rep), Ed McGeehan (regional service & installation manager), Dr. Dunson, Steve Wagner (office designer), Jack Wagner (equipment specialist).



In addition to the latest equipment and BencoNET technologies, each suite features a stunning view.



"My team and I try to see everything from the patient's perspective," says Dr. Dunson.



A conference room with flat-panel monitor can be used for consultations, staff meetings and continuing education.

"Doing a project like this can be stressful but in

this case, it wasn't."

EQUIPMENT HIGHLIGHTS

Midmark

OL-7 compressor
1000-2P vacuum system

A-dec

511 chairs
Cascade 1040 chairs
Console upper middle & base
1601 doctor's stools
1622 assistant's stools
6300 ceiling mounted light

SciCan

Hydrim instrument washer

Progeny

Preva DC X-ray

Pelton & Crane

LFII track lights

Designer

Steve Wagner

The last part was easy. His wife, Hillary, is an accomplished marketer who "understands that it's one thing to attract patients, but another to attract the *right* patients" according to Dr. Dunson. She developed the name Dunson Dental Design to reflect the practice's focus on functional esthetics, and crafted a supporting image. The other two parts of the equation – location and environment – weren't quite so straightforward.

Dr. Dunson, his wife and two children are long-time residents of midtown Atlanta, the city's cultural corridor and home to everything from trendy restaurants and art galleries to progressive companies and technology firms. "It's unquestionably a hot area: vibrant, full of excitement and action," he said. It's also exactly the type of neighborhood his target patients would be attracted to.

"I'd always wanted to practice in midtown," said Dr. Dunson. "I looked at many buildings with my broker, but never found exactly what I was looking for." When he finally did locate an ideal building, a contact at his broker's office assured him that they they'd never accept a healthcare tenant. Undaunted, he pressed ahead anyway and, after six months of negotiations, became the building's sole medical practitioner.

The neighborhood was right – but what about when patients walk through his door? In a specially-focused boutique practice like his, the environment would need to reinforce patients' feeling of having chosen the right dentist. Dr. Dunson worked with Benco Dental designer Steve Wagner on space planning. "A total of 6,500 square feet was available. I knew I wanted the suites to offer great views, so I picked the best 2,500."

Though his new space is some 2,000 square feet smaller than his Stone Mountain office, an efficient layout with fewer suites helped make the most of every inch. In fact, the clever planning, together with minimalist interior decoration, imparts a remarkable sense of spaciousness that adds to the soothing environment Dr. Dunson hoped to create.

"My team and I try to see everything from the patient's perspective," he said. That explains the thoughtful interior, which speaks volumes about the practice before patients meet Dr. Dunson for the first time. For instance, if the tranquil reception area seems welcoming but sparse, it's only because patients relax there for a few moments at most before being called back, past the open sterilization center and the practice's dedicated imaging and photography center, into to one of the sunlight-bathed suites, each one featuring a stunning view of the city.

Though the new practice's design was a step up from his previous office, Dr. Dunson's technology needed few upgrades. Stone Mountain was already paperless, adopting digital radiography five years prior and a digital pan one year before the move. "I wanted to give us all time to adjust," he said. "We knew it would be easier to adapt if we changed just one variable at a time."

In addition to his imaging systems, Dr. Dunson shifted a number of existing technologies to the new office, including a laser, CAD/CAM milling machine and patient education system. "The BencoNET guys were great," he said of the technology integration process. "The system is totally wireless, and everything that doesn't need to be seen, isn't."

Some of his equipment also made it to the new office, including his KaVo implant handpiece which has been with him for 11 years. Dr. Dunson chose A-dec for most major equipment – "I think they make the best chairs for our purposes," he said – along with KaVo air driven handpieces and BienAir electrics.

"I chose the Benco Dental team because of the relationship we've built," explained Dr. Dunson. "I don't usually deal with reps – that's something I delegate to my team. But after working with other companies, we got to know Shawn Angell. I shared my dream with him and he introduced me to the team that would make it happen. It has proven to be a good decision. Doing a project like this can be stressful but in this case, it wasn't."

Dr. Dunson's own team includes a dedicated group of professionals who have been with him for a combined two decades. His administrative coordinator, dental assistant and hygienist have worked in the practice for 11 years, six years and four years, respectively. Collectively, the team takes nothing for granted, continually re-evaluating their procedures and protocols to keep the practice at the forefront of Atlanta's dental community.

Still, despite Dr. Dunson's astute business sense, he insists that doing great dentistry will always be his overriding priority. "I don't look at dentistry in terms of competition. It's not about staying ahead of other dentists," he said. "What it's really about is finding the right match between doctor and patients. That's where success lies." ■

more with Dr. Dunson...

On why he chose to become a dentist...

In my teens, I had a great experience with my orthodontist. I said to myself, "Here's something I might like to do." The more I looked into it, the more I preferred the lifestyle of a dentist to that of a physician. I have a passion for learning and dentistry is nothing if not a lifetime learning process, so I feel like I made the right decision.

On his location in midtown Atlanta...

It's unquestionably a hot area: vibrant, full of excitement and action. The area is so alive it's tantamount to being here during the Olympics – there's a lot of excitement and action all of the time. Being here in part has allowed me to attract patients from everywhere.

On what type of cases he prefers...

For me, it's more exciting to do less but do it better...and that's absolutely possible if you work at it. Instead of doing 30 patients at \$1,000 each, I'd rather do one case at \$30,000. You just have to find the right patients and, most importantly, you can't walk away from the serious responsibility that comes with those kinds of cases. If you can do all of that, it's extremely challenging and also rewarding.

On patient education...

Dentistry is a partnership. I insist on making sure my patients fully understand their treatment so when we call on them for compliance, they do so willingly. Success for them equals success for us. We do whatever it takes to ensure the best results.

On the future of dentistry...

I think, in 10 years, there will be a greater divide market-wise and I want to be on the right side of it so I'm starting now. There will be more government intervention and I think we'll see volume practices at one end of the spectrum and boutiques at the other, and less of the middle ground.

On professional development...

The science of dentistry is always changing and to me, that's exciting. You're never too old to have mentors. I visit my mentors on a regular basis. Dentistry is a community where we all learn from one another.

On achieving his dream practice...

Is it easy to create a viable practice when it's so focused? No, but with hunger, determination and resiliency it is possible. Today, helping people is what interests me most.



A dedicated photography and imaging center is just one of the practice's amenities.