



sexual **healing**

We wrote a little earlier in this issue that one of, if not the favourite thing about our job is the incredible variety we find. Here's a perfect example of that. Just a few hours ago we were admiring the views from The Bank of New York Mellon's 49th floor meeting suite in Canary Wharf. Now we are in the middle of Soho, just about to take a look at one of the most forward-thinking and impressive NHS facilities the capital has to offer.



We should first say that when the good folk of Area Sq presented us with a number (and, again, variety) of recently completed schemes, one stood out for us by a country mile. This has nothing to do with the standard of design and fit-out or the levels of expertise employed, of course. This stood out because it is a fascinating and quite brilliant story.

Chelsea and Westminster Hospital's new state-of-the-art sexual health centre at 56 Dean Street in Soho was officially opened by Lord Darzi, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Health, in May.

Previously located in Vincent Square, Victoria, the health centre – which provides a wide range of free and confidential sexual health and HIV services for men and women of all ages – relocated to larger premises in Soho to enable easier access for patients.

We meet with Dr Alan McOwan, Lead Clinician at 56 Dean Street, Leigh Chislett, the Clinic Manager, and Area Sq Design Director Amanda Godwin-Jones. We begin by talking about the location. 'The ideal place to have a sexual clinic in the whole of Europe would be here!' Alan begins. 'It is right in the epicentre of just about every high risk group. When we knew we had to move because of space issues, this was always our preferred place to be.

'Victoria Street didn't meet disability standards, it wasn't air conditioned, it was dated and horribly cramped – it wasn't really fit for purpose any more.

'We viewed a building down the road – which was an NHS building – and they basically had a corridor free! We got to the point where we were looking at converting a▶▶▶▶▶



▶▶▶▶ disabled toilet into two clinic rooms. We thought this was a bit mad and that we should look at something a bit more ambitious!

‘The instant we saw this space we knew it was right; it had the right floor sizes, it was DDA compliant, it had great window spacing which meant we could fit in a good number of clinic rooms. The other thing is that it is set back on the street. You want to be very central but discreet and this part of Dean Street is cut in. If you couldn’t make a sexual health clinic work here, you couldn’t make it work anywhere. We really fought to get this space.’

Which brings us on to another key area: funding. ‘We belong to a foundation trust,’ Alan continues, ‘which means we are slightly more independent than other parts of the NHS and so it can build up reserves of money. It had developed a surplus of money that was then re-invested to develop this building.’

‘We had to put together a business plan – a very in-depth business plan,’ Leigh tells us. ‘We had to demonstrate how the building would work over the next 10 years and improve on numbers and results.’

Before we discuss the design and the environment, we should mention 56 Dean Street’s formative results – results Leigh and Alan are both, quite rightly, very proud about. ‘In the first month we saw a 19% increase compared to the number of people we saw at the Victoria Clinic, and, looking at our trajectory, the number of patients with HIV that we will care for will go up by over a third this year, which is a challenge for us but exactly what we want,’ Alan reveals. ‘This clearly shows that people are responding positively to what we have on offer here.’

That offer includes a discreet and contemporary entrance, and three levels of clinical facilities. The design, from reception through to 4th floor offices, isn’t what you

would expect from the NHS. In a very good way.

Chelsea and Westminster Hospital was initially looking to procure the project on a traditional basis, but Area Sq approached the project purely from a design aspect with a view to meet the brief by creating a unique environment. Area Sq was able to demonstrate that the brief could be achieved on time and within budget, whilst coordinating design inputs from a number of clinicians, managers and, most importantly, users of the service.

‘We first started talking to the guys aeons ago,’ Amanda tells us. ‘The whole point of doing this was to break the mould. We knew we could offer something different, something other than the traditional route. We had to go through a tender process – and this was not just Design & Build companies – and, to be honest, we took a bit of a punt!’

‘We knew we had such a good relationship with the guys and I knew what they wanted. We knew we could win it on design and then we’d make the costs fit, we’d make sure we specifying exactly to NHS standards – but we were actually giving the guys what they wanted.’

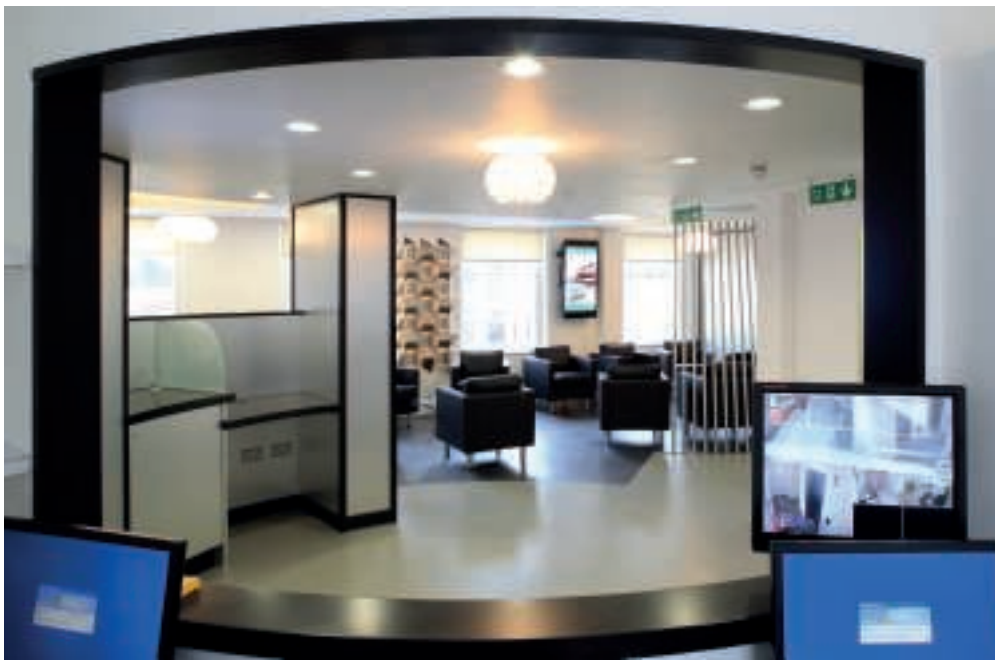
‘To be honest, Area Sq were the only ones who really listened to us – the others said ‘Yeah yeah yeah – we know what you want’,’ Leigh reveals.

‘When their presentation came it was that much more impressive,’ Alan agrees, ‘the other stakeholders were around the table and they were shown visuals that very clearly related to what everyone had said they wanted and aspired to. I think the design aspect really swung it.’

‘We didn’t just see this as ‘NHS’. One of the areas that we felt was really important was that it wasn’t just the front areas that were comfortable – it was everywhere,’ Amanda explains. ‘What we tried to do here – and we’re talking about clinical rooms here, so there are certain things that we did have to adhere to – was to pick colours and finishes to make those rooms comfortable to be in and not make people feel as though they are now entering a medical centre.’

A lot of things were jettisoned, of course, from the Victoria Street facility, although we should point out that this was a successful, award-winning service. Alan and Leigh were particularly surprised to find that a couple of the elements from Victoria were cherished by the patients they spoke with – not least a cumbersome pillar which, patients admitted, gave them a place to hide ▶▶▶▶

case study



»»»» when they nervously first visited the clinic. 'When Amanda first designed the waiting area she had clearly listened to this,' Alan tells us. 'She created spaces where people could go off and hide, that there were places where there was music, and others where it was quiet.'

'We intentionally directed more of the money into this. Our office areas are lovely, albeit slightly utilitarian here in comparison. We wanted to spend the money on the areas where the patients were. I'm not sure we ever said this, but in the very first meeting we had it was suggested that Leigh and Alan wanted the building to have the feel of a boutique hotel or a health spa!'

The result is certainly closer to those environments than it is to a corridor or a converted disabled toilet. 'Why shouldn't it be as nice as a private clinic?' Leigh asks. 'Why shouldn't we spend this money on something a little different? I think we've got a lot greater quality and style here for

the same money we could have spent on the same old stuff. We were asked 'Why do you want nice chairs?' Why not!

'This is quite groundbreaking because sexual health is usually thrown into basements and outhouses. This is designed to encourage people to come in. We've had some really overwhelming, nice comments from patients.'

'The move has provided us with another opportunity to think outside the box,' Alan agrees. 'We wanted to move firmly away from the sterile and dull environments that are all too often associated with sexual health clinics and services.'

'With the number of sexually transmitted infections continuing to rise, we wanted to break down the stigma of visiting a sexual health clinic. The colours, finishes and quality of materials and furnishings used at 56 Dean Street have created an inviting, comfortable and reassuring environment. We want people to feel welcome, and this

unique look and feel allows us to do that. We didn't want patients to feel as though they were just a number.'

'We worked closely with the team to create an environment where both aesthetics and patients' privacy requirements were respected,' Amanda continues. 'Design serves multiple purposes, and in this instance, if it is getting people through the door then we have succeeded in what we set out to achieve. Each floor is treated slightly differently, and they have their own personalities. The design is dictated by the function of the floors – the idea is to separate each floor out so that the space is more efficient and people move through quickly and easily. The 1st floor, for example, is quite soft – this is where people will come the first time they visit, whilst the 3rd floor is where patients come for treatments and is a bit edgier.'

'This was a tough project in that there were a lot of things thrown at us halfway through what was a tight schedule, and there were a lot of things going on and people who suddenly got plugged in, but we managed to encompass all these things. There was constant communication, so we were able to overcome any problems. These guys put their hearts and souls into this – it was a fun project.'

With its creative floor finishes, leather sofas, designer wallpaper, sleek design elements and WiFi access, the new centre has been described by the NHS team as 'bringing patients services for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases into the 21st century'. We couldn't agree more ●

essential ingredients

Client:	• 56 Dean Street, Chelsea & Westminster Hospital
Design & Planning:	• Area Sq 020 8993 2120
Mechanical Engineer:	• MD Enertech
Electrical Engineer:	• 2G
Client Consultant:	• Hurley Palmer Flatt
Furniture:	• Sketch Studios 020 7647 5255
Carpets:	• InterfaceFLOR 08705 304030
Vinyl Flooring:	• Armstrong 01642 768660
Partitioning:	• Komfort 01293 529500