

By Brian Libby
Photography by
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At Seattle Kids Dentistry, color, natural light, and an open plan transform pediatric oral care

Although it is located in a former warehouse where workers fabricated tiles made from porcelain—the same material used in most fillings—Seattle Kids Dentistry is not the usual banal chamber of root canals and dated magazines. Colorful, open, high-tech, and filled with natural light, the design of the space exemplifies the clinic's mission to make a trip to the dentist an experience for kids that is free of fear.

Located just off Puget Sound at the western edge of Seattle's Queen Anne neighborhood, the project marks a second collaboration between co-founder Dr. Kristi Linsenmayer and Jessica Helgerson (see interview, page 96) and her Portland, Oregon-based firm, Jessica Helgerson Interior Design (JHID). Linsenmayer had previously opened a small pediatric dental clinic in Ketchikan, Alaska, and hired Helgerson—based on her portfolio of design that blends color and natural materials—to design its interior.

"I've been in practice for 20 years, and I'm happy being in my comfort zone—that comes with good design," says Linsenmayer, who divides her time between the Alaska and Seattle clinics; the latter she co-founded with Dr. Purva Merchant. The design of both clinics includes open spaces full of natural light, which has had a calming effect on young patients. "It's pretty amazing," Linsenmayer adds. "I have many special needs kids and the natural light seems to work well."

In their previous practices, Seattle Kids Dentistry's founders "both had that feeling that every dental office looks, feels, and smells the same," Merchant explains. "Of course, it is a medical practice, but the first thought when you walk in shouldn't be, 'Oh no, it's the dentist.'"

The designer's first charge was to make children feel comfortable, starting with views outside, as well as of other kids who are undergoing treatment. "The building had really good bones and was a blank canvas," says Helgerson. "It was just a long, simple rectangle with a band of nice, big, steel-sash windows."

Textures revealed and applied are works of art

Individual treatment rooms were scrapped in favor of a long row of open dental chairs. "We needed an open plan to encourage kids to watch other kids and promote behavior modeling. There are high



Right yellow balanced by deep purple comprises the color palette. The reception desk was custom-designed by Helgerson and built with Douglas fir. The interior surfaces of the exterior board-formed concrete walls are revealed behind old drywall, and the designer kept the surfaces bare to add industrial character.

ceilings lots of windows, few doors, and nothing to hide," Merchant says. A former vault, now used as an X-ray room, is one of the only spaces with a closing door, but even that door has a window so parents can peek in.

Throughout the space, JHID's design embraces color and texture. Exposed, board-formed concrete, revealed behind old drywall, was left as is to retain an industrial feel. "We toyed with refinishing the surface, but it added so much as is," Merchant says. "It's like the artwork in the office." Yellow and purple are the signature colors that coat utilitarian things: drinking fountains, window frames, door handles, and small seating cubes for parents beside the dental chairs.

Drawing inspiration from the area's maritime heritage, the designers commissioned a series of colorful barnacles and had them applied to the walls throughout the clinic—some three-dimensional and others painted on—by artist Carrie Merkel. To add warmth, the designers introduced natural wood throughout, including sliding barn doors, desktops, and columns capping interior walls painted white.

Proof that dental visits can be fun, after all

Technology provides distractions for young patients, but only at the right times. Television screens were placed on the ceilings to help kids cope with more serious procedures, but nowhere else. "You give kids less dental aesthetic by giving them something else to focus on. It takes away the stress of having to focus on the injection coming," Merchant says. "We didn't want a jumbore. That's why we don't have a play area or a video game station in the lobby like many pediatric dentists. We want the fun to be in the dental chair, not the waiting room."

And, though porcelain was once fabricated in the space, the point now is to use less of it. The colorful, open, clever design at Seattle Kids Dentistry helps change patients' perceptions of dentist visits from dreaded to fun experiences, while emphasizing the serious preventative dental care its founders provide. "It's important not just what we do every six months," Merchant adds, "but what the parents do everyday." ■



Seattle Kids Dentistry
 Designer: Jessica Helgeson
 Interior Design (JHID)
 Client: Kristi Linsenmayer
 and Purva Merchant
 Where: Seattle
 What: 2,200 square feet
 on one floor
 Cost: \$182
 For a full project source
 list, see page 160 or
 visit contractdesign.com



Floor Plan

- 1 Reception
- 2 Open treatment area
- 3 Office
- 4 Consultation
- 5 Private treatment room
- 6 Staff break room
- 7 X-ray (vault)

Helgeson designed custom upholstered cubes (left) for parents who want to sit near the patient chairs within the open treatment area, and a custom Douglas fir sliding barn door (above), which leads to the X-ray room that occupies a former vault.

Key Design Highlights

- An abundance of natural light keeps kids at ease during dental visits.
- Bright colors balanced with warm textures create an atmosphere that is comfortable and fun.
- Exposed concrete walls and custom wood details by the designer capture the aesthetic of the Pacific Northwest.
- Artistic interventions, such as barnacles that adorn the walls, recall the area's maritime history.

Jessica Helgerson founded her practice in 2000, and designs a variety of interiors, including the pediatric dental clinic in Seattle featured on page 54.



In the Spotlight: Jessica Helgerson

Founder of the Portland, Oregon-based eponymous practice Jessica Helgerson Interior Design—the seven-person firm behind the pediatric dental clinic in Seattle featured on page 54—Jessica Helgerson has more than fifteen years experience designing residential and commercial interiors. While she does not specialize in healthcare projects, her approach to the typography addresses the goals and needs of her clients. With a strong interest in sustainability, Helgerson and her family of four live in a 540-square-foot cottage with a green roof on five acres of farmland.

When and how did your firm get started?

I opened an office in Santa Barbara, California, in 2000 and moved it up to Portland when my husband and I relocated in 2005.

How does your location in the Pacific Northwest inform your design aesthetic?

We take on many remodeling projects, and our designs respond thoughtfully to existing structures. We are currently remodeling several midcentury houses designed by well-known Pacific Northwest architects in styles specific to the area: lots of natural wood, open volumes, straightforward detailing, and a strong connection between inside and outside. On the other hand, we have worked on Mediterranean structures, farm cottages, a Mexican restaurant, and even a video arcade. In each of those projects, we responded more specifically to the building and the client than the geographic locations.

Does your approach to the design process differ when working in a locale outside your own?

Yes, we love learning about other regions, and when applicable, we weave in some of our findings into the design of the project. While it is exciting to work on projects that are farther away, it is also more complicated. When a project is local, we can pop over weekly to check on progress, but when it is not, we rely deeply on contractors to execute our vision. We also design a large percentage of the furnishings that go into our projects, so on out-of-town projects, we either work with new craftspeople or have elements built locally and ship them to the sites.

How did you approach the design of the pediatric dental clinic in Seattle, given your firm does not focus on healthcare design?

We worked with a dental consultant, who helped us with the practical aspects of designing a clinic, but our design came from the building—which is built from exposed, board-formed concrete. The geography of the Puget Sound inspired the abstracted barnacles, which are playfully used throughout the space, and natural wood, plentiful in the region, is incorporated throughout. A pediatric dental clinic requires a fun, happy, and child-friendly aesthetic. We were eager to create a space that didn't look like a typical dental office while fulfilling the client's programmatic requirements.

You previously designed a dental clinic in Alaska for the same client. How did your approach to the two offices vary?

Our client, who is a very competent dentist and understands how best to organize her space, wanted similar layouts for both offices. The first project was in a beautiful location on the Tongass Narrows of Ketchikan Alaska, and our design was inspired by the trees and mountains that surround the new building in which it is located. In both cases, we implemented an open plan with just a few private treatment rooms.

From where do you typically draw design inspiration?

When we start a new project, we always begin with image research. We put together boards of photographs that inspire us, including other spaces, colors, materials, natural elements, and art. We are, at the same time, inspired by our clients and their narratives, as well as by the spaces in which we are designing. We respond directly to the architecture of the buildings, and then we layer furnishings and lighting that are “of the moment” and fitting for our clients.

What interior space, anywhere in the world, inspires you? Why?

My office. It isn't particularly fancy, but it has lovely big windows, gets beautiful morning light, and is always humming with activity and thought. It's a place that is full of creativity, kindness, happiness, and excitement. I'm really inspired by my team of designers here.