

AIRWAVES ARCHITECTURE

Julian Jacobs has a design on broadcasters

by Gloria Hildebrandt and Ted Davis

Architect Julian Jacobs occupies a somewhat unique niche in his chosen profession. He has developed an expertise in designing the domains of radio, TV and cable operators, and has put that knowledge to use in the drafting of a number of Canadian broadcast facilities in the past nine years.

"There's absolutely no room for error in this business," says Jacobs firmly. "When you're a day late, the broadcaster client loses their advertising for that year. The advertisers have signed documents that say you will be on the air on this date and if they're not they lose those agreements. That's how serious it is."

Julian Jacobs Architects Ltd. has

designed several broadcast facilities, including the Global TV newsroom, the YTV and TSN buildings and the CHIN radio transmission building on Toronto Island — all as a result of the company's particular sensitivity to broadcasters' needs.

Jacobs did not set out to specialize in designing broadcast facilities. But in 1982 he was invited to take on some of the design work for C-Channel, the short-lived pay-TV "culture" channel that was an early casualty in Canada's fledgling pay-TV industry. This invite came courtesy of Julian's brother, Frank, who was then involved in establishing the pay-TV station.

Frank Jacobs contracted Julian to completely redesign one floor of a

downtown office building to meet the needs of the fledgling service. In the case of C-Channel, this meant creating a TV station in miniature, complete with a small studio, control room, master control, editing suites, library and offices. As a pay service, C-Channel did not have any great need for production space, and was not therefore hampered by the lack of ceiling height imposed by the office building structure.

Part of the C-Channel job did require, however, the creation of a new kind of console for the control room. Jacobs and partner Gail Weininger designed a prototype console unit which proved so useful that it was essentially duplicated for the renovation of Global TV's newsroom two years later.

"We took their requirements for equipment, which were extensive," explains Weininger. "Then what we did was take the functional aspects and combine them with the aesthetic."

The result of this combination of design parameters is a console from which the table legs were banished in order to let people slide back and forth in wheeled chairs without encountering obstacles. Instead, it stand on a support that curves down to the floor from the back of the unit and also serves to house equipment cables. The design allows plentiful "kick space" under the console, and is rubber-coated to protect the cables from just that sort of treatment.

As both an architectural and interior design firm, furnishings, materials and lighting are integral to the work of Jacobs' company. "It's not enough to consider just the base building," explains Jacobs. "We also build out the interior. Interior designers have knowledge and an approach to design that architects don't have. In the end it serves the client better."

Weininger, who is responsible for coordinating the interior design work, begins the process by compiling a detailed list of the client's needs. She determines the equipment, furnishings, size and desired atmosphere for

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the work spaces of all the company's employees and executives, and discerns what necessary work relationships they have with each other. This information helps to determine traffic flow and has a bearing on the design of the space.

From such a client assessment, Weininger and Jacobs discovered that YTV, the "youth TV" specialty service, actually required from between 25,000 and 35,000 sq. ft. for its work force to operate effectively. Yet YTV was under the impression

advantage of being located in a city zone designated as a broadcast signal transmission and reception "corridor."

This same kind of corridor played a part in the choice of an empty, one-storey office building in the Toronto suburb of Don Mills for the housing of The Sports Network (TSN). Once located, the building had to be completely overhauled in order to make it broadcast-specific. Like YTV, this called for the construction of studios, control rooms, audio



Julian Jacobs designed parts of the Global TV newsroom, including a sunken, multi-level control room and adjoining editing suites.

that about 13,000 sq. ft. would suffice for its needs, and in 1990, was simply planning to renovate its existing offices and technical areas.

Jacobs demonstrated to YTV management that this was not a practical solution, and found a space that matched his estimates in an old building in west Toronto. This was already being renovated by Jacobs as part of the Jefferson Square development of abandoned factories and warehouses, and started life as a ramshackle building dominated by a boxy, shack-like structure in its middle.

This was removed to expose the solid brick core of the building, which Jacobs completely redesigned for the construction of two studios, control rooms, a master control, editing suites, audio booths, libraries, equipment rooms, a board room and two reception areas.

Phase two of the project gave YTV executives a new home in an adjoining, taller building. A open walkway, or "muse," now connects the two structures.

Both buildings have in common "a lyrical, fun design imperative," says Jacobs. "We were creating a place that programs television for young people, and we wanted to get that across in the architecture of the YTV facilities."

More crucially, the Jefferson Square location for YTV had the

booths, post-production rooms, etc.

Jacobs designed within the confines of the long, narrow building by locating all the office and "non-technical" spaces at one end and the amenities, such as washrooms and a lunchroom, at the other end. In between is a glass-lined corridor that looks into the "technical" spaces, creating a "display case" effect for that walk through the middle of the building. To create studios, Jacobs had to remove part of the roof, raise new walls and then build a new roof.

Although fairly straightforward, the TSN job had to be accomplished within severe time limits. The specialty service was due to go on-air in Sept. 1984, and Jacobs started his design work in April of the same year. To make matters even more complicated, TSN management asked for some cost cutbacks halfway through the project, necessitating a few design adjustments.

"They cut back some of the architectural features and asked that all the money be put into the essentials," says Jacobs. "It was still a good job though, and it was exciting to meet their deadlines."

Much of Jacobs' broadcast design work has been done in association with Imagineering Ltd., a television engineering firm. Through this connection, Jacobs has become involved in ongoing renovations at

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the offices of the Global Television Network in Toronto.

For its tenth anniversary in 1984, Global wanted to do some extensive renovations. The most dramatic change was the creation of a working newsroom which would be visible behind the news anchors while on-air.

"They wanted to see that layering of spaces, that richness," says Jacobs. "You'd have the news reporter right in front. Behind would be the screen with the world on it. Behind the screen would be people working. Behind the people would be the editing rooms. This layering was very important because it created a liveliness on-air."

This concept required many different design innovations. For instance, the glass screens and windows are angled four degrees to prevent light and sound reflection, and a linear diffuser surrounds the entire newsroom, concealing mechanical details but permitting ventilation.

The control room is designed in "terraces" that start at the studio's floor level and descend from there. The top, floor level terrace gives producers and directors the ability to watch a news show "live" through a window facing the studio or to turn around and watch a bank of monitors. With the switcher engineer, tape operators etc. sitting slightly below on lower terraces, the view to these monitors is unobstructed. This whole facility had to be excavated, as the Global news studio was already at the "basement" level. A central pillar was removed from the studio, which involved careful support of the videotape library directly overhead.

Jacobs also designed Global's post-production rooms. Cozy, attractive and efficient, these were designed for presentations to clients using the same terraced concept. A bank of sofa cushions at the very back is raised to let viewers see over the heads of producers working at a central desk. Further below is the distinctive console unit where the editors do their work, while on the far wall are the monitors. Careful attention was given to the lighting of the room, which permits good visibility over work spaces, while keeping glare from the monitors and permitting a subdued lighting for clients at the back.

Jacobs seems to delight in difficult challenges, and has yet to meet one he won't tackle. When he designed a transmission building for CHIN Radio on Toronto Island, he encountered the need for an electromagnetic shield — essentially a metal screen — that would surround the entire building internally. This task would usually be reserved for an engineering firm, but Jacobs took it upon himself to meet all the requirements of designing the shield.

For all Jacobs' disciplined attention to scheduling, budgetary and technical matters, he has another contrasting side to his personality. He is also an artist who paints using water colours and pastels, preferring representational art like landscapes and portraits. In fact, he enjoys the architectural projects that draw on his artistic talents.

"Architecture is an art based on reality," Jacobs says over coffee in Global's cafeteria. "It requires functional creativity. People have to respond to it. Being ahead of the time doesn't wash with me. A design must be right for its time. To do that you have to avoid fadism. Architecture that does that has tremendous integrity." ■

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