

By **Martha Uniacke Breen**

In nature, the hexagon is the pinnacle of elegant engineering, combining maximum space efficiency with minimum use of material. And at Bell ExpressVu's new call centre in suburban Toronto, it's the basis for a high-density installation that's as pleasant as a walk in the park.



The hexagon is one of nature's most elegant forms. It provides the most efficient ratio of storage capacity to space and material, and is among the strongest and most infinitely expandable of constructs. And from the exquisite prisms of rock crystals to the humble honeycomb, the shape is as beautiful as it is sensible. So how come nobody ever thought of basing workstations on it before?

It seems somehow fitting that the first major office installation based on the hexagon should fall to interior designer Gail Weinger and her partner, architect Julian Jacobs. Jacobs' private houses and public buildings around the Toronto area have earned praise for their ability to blend imaginative architectural forms with an engaging dose of populism.

For all their architectural rigour, the firm's buildings often include a whimsical element, endearing them to the people who use them. Jacobs flared the cornices of a neighbourhood bank to echo the shapes of nearby trees; when he built a Modernist house on a country property in eastern Ontario, he clad it in local stone like the century homes nearby.

Weinger and Jacobs were commissioned to build a brand-new call centre for their longtime client, the satellite TV provider Bell ExpressVu. It was a daunting

challenge: the new location was a vast, featureless slab that sprawled over some 70,000 square feet on the fourth floor of a squat, sprawling six-storey edifice, eliminating the option of skylights; the ceilings were spirit-crushingly low and lined with acres of odious T-bar. How could they put in hundreds of tiny cubicles to house up to 773 employees, and not create the IT equivalent of a sweatshop?

On top of that, given that call centre work is a gruelling, stressful occupation, plagued by burnout and high turnover, the design had to be much more than merely efficient – it had to be psychologically uplifting as well.

The answer, as Weinger discovered in a Eureka moment at a Herman Miller booth at a trade show, lay in the hexagon. Miller had a small display of its then virtually untried Resolve workstations, which centred on a 120-degree angle rather than the ubiquitous 90-degree norm. That simple idea inspired her to conceive turning a cold, factory-like working environment into a comfortable, and even refreshing experience.

Her inspiration came from the space's one positive attribute: the entire floor was wrapped in perimeter windows, and the view consisted of the broad lawns of other nearby high-rise office buildings and a large ravine park. "The first step was

to organize the administrative and amenities hubs around the central core, and to arrange the (workstations) on the perimeter," Weinger recalls. "Then, to counteract the blankness of the floor space, we conceived the idea of 'a walk in the park': a meandering path through the inner circle of the floor dividing the public and private spaces."

The park metaphor was strengthened with an autumnal colour scheme and lots of garden-like references, including a full-size pergola at the very centre of the building. The pergola's canopy of trailing ivy sends dappled light down from a hidden bank of full-spectrum grow lights. The walkway itself, made of concrete tinted in splotches of rust, green, and brown, also has a dappled woodsy feeling. But it is on the fronts of the 700 employee lockers that the leafy theme is most literal.

Extending in small linear groups on either side of the pergola, they're covered in red or green laminate stamped in a relief pattern of fallen leaves. The effect is almost mural-like, and neatly solved another major puzzle. "Since the standard locker width is 12 inches, the space requirement was overwhelming," says Weinger. "We had to figure out how to fit all of them in, without making it look like a high school."

That was her second Eureka moment: she came across a small California company that makes lockers in matched pairs of interlocking Ls. This not only allowed for a more interesting shape visually, but cut space requirements by 25 per cent.

Live plants, walkways and an emphasis on daylight, sound reduction, and physical comfort give the place a natural serenity. The new workstations comprise the minimum amount of space allowed by code – under 95 feet – but feel and look much larger.

Each station features a boomerang-shaped desk set in the angle, providing more surface than a conventional rectangular desk. An adjustable overhead canopy helps cut glare and further define individual territory. Workstation walls are made of translucent fabric that allows light to penetrate towards the core, providing privacy without isolation. And because the hexagon shape arises out of the intersection of multiple stations, the



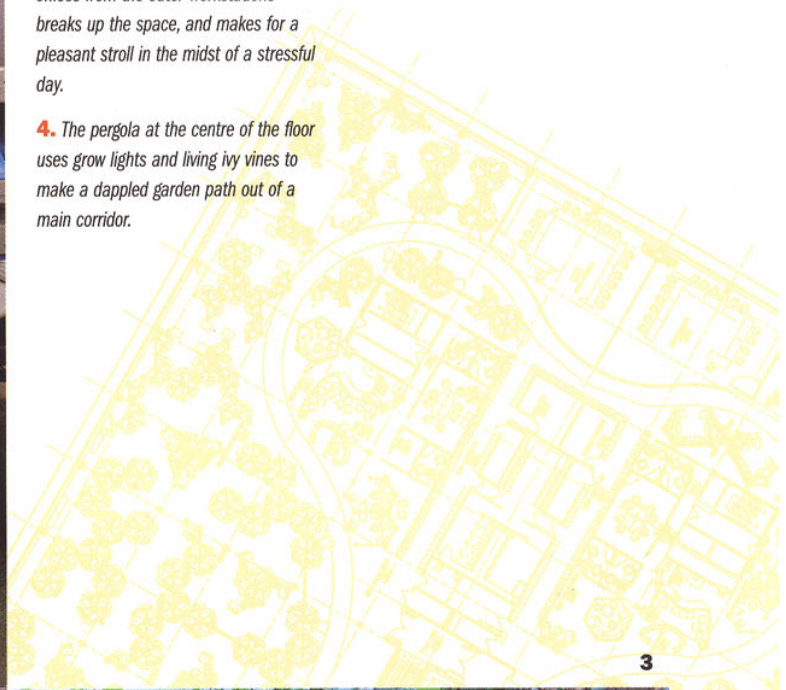
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1. The hexagonal configuration and boomerang-shaped work surfaces maximize the perceived space for each employee, while actually allowing for higher densities than standard cubicles.

2. Curves and autumnal bursts of colour give this commissary space an *al fresco* feeling.

3. The walkway that divides the central offices from the outer workstations breaks up the space, and makes for a pleasant stroll in the midst of a stressful day.

4. The pergola at the centre of the floor uses grow lights and living ivy vines to make a dappled garden path out of a main corridor.



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apparent space allotted to each employee blends with that of his neighbours.

Though the workstations are crammed around the outer two-thirds or so of floor space, there's enough room for comfortable corridors between groups, a wide variety of set-ups that banishes numbing symmetry, and six different wall screen colours to choose from. The proof of the design's overall success is in the results: staff turnover is about 1.5 per year, in an industry where the norm is four.

"In society, convenience is never reversible," Jacobs muses. "Once you have it you can never give it up again. And it's interesting that here, at the leading edge of communications technology, that this should have occurred. The paradigm for workstations has shifted from the cubicle to something completely different. It's moved forward, and it can never go back." 