

# a walk in the park

Clustering 600 workstations like grapes and basing circulation around a serpentine walkway, Julian Jacobs Architects transforms a nondescript office space into an airy, bright call center

By Katie Weeks  
Photography by Interior Images



A serpentine path of sealed and chemically stained concrete (above) winds through the space, breaking up workgroups. A wooden trellis grid clads breakout areas (opposite) and serves as a landmark to orient workers. Alongside ivy growing overhead, the wood was chosen to soften the space's high-tech nature.

By their nature, call centers often don't lend themselves to great design and many times end up looking like a cubicle farm straight out of a "Dilbert" comic strip. With people and technology crammed together in row after row of cookie-cutter workstations, turnover is a chief concern. With this in mind, worker satisfaction was a key issue when Bell ExpressVu, a Canadian satellite TV provider and division of Bell Canada, outgrew its old space and decided to move its call center functions off-site to a new building.

On paper, the situation certainly had "Dilbert" potential: Fit 773 employees and 600 workstations into 60,000 sq. ft. of a low-ceilinged office building in suburban Toronto. What Bell ExpressVu got in its new Wynford Call Centre, however, was an airy, light-filled space that uses a number of small design elements to encourage a sense of community, thanks to local firm Julian Jacobs Architects.

"They went from this really nice warehouse building with 24-ft.-high ceilings to an office tower, and were quite concerned about how the staff would take the move," says Gail Weininger, interior design partner at Julian Jacobs Architects. At the time of the move, says Patrick Bourque, operations manager, SNC Lavalin/Nexacor, the project manager, "There was quite a bit of competition between companies that required customer service staff and there was a lot of attrition between them." He adds that "the previous space was quite a technological center with certain amenities and comforts. Now that people were being moved out, we didn't want to have them feel penalized by being away from the corporate office."

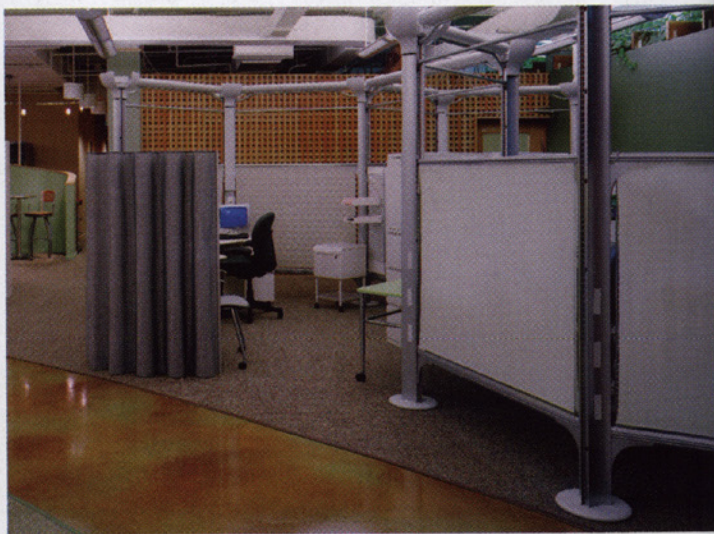


Locker fronts (below) are finished with a laminate bearing Bell ExpressVu's signature leaf pattern, tying them into the shadow patterns cast by ivy growing overhead.



Having worked with Bell ExpressVu on its previous headquarters, Julian Jacobs Architects looked to transfer a number of design elements from the previous space. Playing off a nature theme in the old building, the new center features a serpentine walkway that breaks up the floor plate, vines that hang from trellises overhead, and lights that are calibrated to emulate dappled sunlight. Seven hundred lockers, normally a design nightmare, are set against the linear core of the building and camouflaged by a leaf motif. Likewise, senior offices that require higher walls and common areas are clustered around four fire stairwells so that light can reach the inner parts of the floor. Rows of cubicles were banished in favor of the meandering, bow-tie walkway and Herman Miller resolve workstations. "We wove the nature aspect into this 60,000-sq.-ft. rectangular floor plate with a park

Though desks in the old space were larger, the cockpit feel of Herman Miller's Resolve system (below) gives a perception of increased space.





# healthcare environment awards competition

theme," says Weininger. "It makes a huge difference when you walk through the space. You don't rush—you meander and walk at a nice pace." Adds Julian Jacobs, principal at Julian Jacobs Architects, "People walk about and effortlessly meet and talk as they go along the path."

Grouping the workstations in vine-like configurations also helped alleviate another inherent call center problem: noise. The Resolve system's 120-degree connection sets employees in a pinwheel fashion so they're not directly facing each other, and its workstation canopies make people feel sheltered, says Weininger. This arrangement also gives the space an airy feeling. "Because people are clustered in these grape formations, we have the same density as cubicles, but the spaces between the clusters are larger.

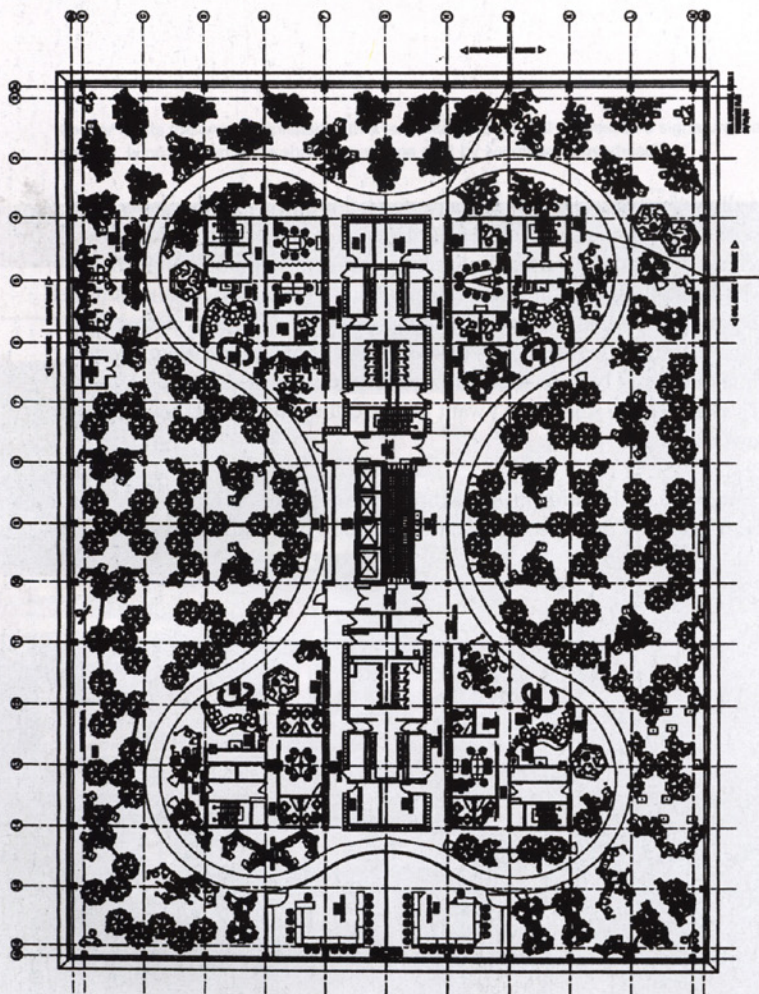
One of four amenity areas (below), adjacent to one of the stairwells, features a water dispenser, a cappuccino maker, and a wall that alludes to the serpentine path.

It allows for big space so that the person behind you is farther away," says Jacobs. The team also installed soft carpeting, removed the low, T-bar ceiling, and added an acoustical ceiling treatment to muffle sound and white noise to soften the environment. Being a technological company, Bell ExpressVu outfitted employees with top-of-the-line headsets so that they don't have to raise their voices to speak to a customer. "We spent a lot of time on [noise] because the client was very concerned about that aspect. It's a call center—they didn't want people calling in and hearing a roar," says Weininger.

In addition to the sunlight-like lighting, the designers also manipulated the color palette to draw people toward the ribbon of windows that lines the







building. At the core of the center, the design elements are darker, but walking toward the windows they become brighter and lighter. "There are a lot of people on the floor and we didn't want it to feel heavy," says Weininger. "It doesn't feel cluttered when you walk through it."

Since its opening, the Wynford Call Centre has been a hit—attrition has decreased and retention increased, says Bourque—and not only with employees. "In my understanding, it's the most visited call center in the world," says Jacobs, adding that dozens of companies have come from around the globe to check it out, some from as far away as Japan. In any language, good design speaks volumes. ■

#### who

*Project:* Bell ExpressVu Call Centre. *Client:* Bell ExpressVu. *Architect,* *lighting designer:* Julian Jacobs Architects. *Interior designer:* Julian Jacobs Architects, Interior Associates. *Structural engineer:* Yolles Partnership. *Mechanical/electrical engineer, communications:* H.H. Angus + Associates. *Project manager:* Nexacor Realty Management. *Construction manager:* Drake + Associates. *Acoustician:* Valcoustics. *Furniture dealer:* Herman Miller Resource. *Photographer:* Interior Images.

#### who

*Wallcoverings:* Walltalkers. *Paint:* Pittsburgh Paints. *Laminate:* Formica. *Flooring:* Surface Solution Industries, Octopus Products, Armstrong Flooring. *Porcelain tile:* Daltile. *Carpet/carpet tile:* Interface. *Carpet fiber:* Dupont Antron Lumena nylon. *Carpet backing:* Glasbac. *Ceiling:* CGC Ceiling Systems, Monoglas. *Lighting:* Cooper, Nelson Garret. *Doors:* National Millwork, Modernfold. *Glass:* Camden Glass. *Window treatments:* Solarfective. *Workstations, workstation seating, other tables:* Herman Miller. *Lounge seating:* Krug. *Conference table:* Spec Furniture. *Cafeteria, dining, training tables:* Henderson + Hellier, Spec. *Files:* Tab, Herman Miller. *Architectural woodworking:* National Millwork. *Cabinetmaking:* Viacraft. *Planters, Plants:* Beach McLeod. *Lockers:* Ideal Products. *Electrical:* Ainsworth. *HVAC, fire safety:* Adelt. *Security:* Bell. *Building management system:* Honeywell. *Communications/IT:* Bell Gateway. *Access flooring:* SMED. *Plumbing fixtures:* American Standard.

#### where

*Location:* Toronto, ON. *Total floor area:* 65,000 sq. ft. *No. of floors:* 1. *Floor size:* 65,000 sq. ft. *Total staff size:* 530. *Cost/sq. ft.:* \$25 (base building enhancement cost); \$30 (tenant improvement); \$25 (furnishings).



