

DAILY
COMMERCIAL NEWS
AND CONSTRUCTION RECORD

VOL. 76 NO. 162

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 27, 2003

\$5.00 plus GST



Translucent workstation screens maximize daylight and views at the Bell ExpressVu call centre in Toronto. Below, hanging ivy adds greenery and dappled shadows.

Photos courtesy JULIAN JACOBS ARCHITECTS

Architects overcome formidable design challenges

High-tech call centre gets human touch

By PATRICIA WILLIAMS
STAFF WRITER

The firm of Julian Jacobs Architects Ltd. faced some formidable challenges when it set out to design a new call centre for Bell ExpressVu in suburban Toronto.

The centre was to occupy one storey in a low-ceiling, nondescript office building on Wynford Drive. The vast floor plate—60,000 square feet of usable space—would accommodate 773 employees at 600 workstations.

Yet, the idea was that all workers would enjoy airy, daylight-filled surroundings—even those located 75 feet from the narrow strip windows.

"Together with Bell ExpressVu, we wanted to radically improve working conditions for the call centre representatives," said Gail Weininger, partner in charge of interior design at the 12-person Toronto architectural firm.

Her solutions included workstations arrayed like grape clusters instead of egg-crate grids and a serpentine walkway

that breaks up the massive space. Vines hanging from trellises and pergolas add greenery and dappled shadows.

Small work groups with open sightlines bring "a human scale and a sense of community," the firm said.

Traditionally, office workstations make 90-degree connections, which form what the designers describe as "the much reviled" ice-cube tray or cube farm.

Largest in Canada

Supplier Herman Miller's Resolve systems furniture was selected in part for its ability to make 120-degree connections. The workstation installation reportedly was the largest of its type in Canada.

"This (furniture) allows groupings that evoke natural shapes such as honeycombs or clusters of grapes," the architectural firm said.

Another point in favour of Resolve was its fluid, organic lines which impart "a sensual and hip" quality to the huge space.

"I didn't want Dilbert cubicles,"
◇ WHITE-NOISE, Page 5



NOTICE

Daily Commercial News did not publish on Tuesday, August 26 due to technical difficulties.

White-noise generators were hung throughout the spaces

From Page 1

Weininger said.

"I wanted a weave to go through the space that would work against the rectangular floor plate."

At Wynford, workstations are, on average, 30-per-cent smaller than in Bell ExpressVu's previous call centre.

Each employee now gets just 95 square feet, the minimum allowed by code. Yet, workers often com-

ment on how much more spacious their new stations feel, the architectural firm said.

Weininger, who joined the firm in 1981 after obtaining her diploma in interior design from Humber College of Applied Arts and Technology, said one of the reasons is that the new desks have a boomerang shape "that wraps around you and gives you more usable space, so they feel bigger."

The workstations also seem more generous, she said, because staff can look out to the spacious common area. As well, the "looser" form of 120-degree connections makes the workstations feel more spacious.

The serpentine pathway, resembling a giant butterfly in plan, knits the large floor plate together.

"That pathway is making waves," Weininger said.

"It will show up in a lot of floor plans."

Given monthly sales

quotas and cranky customers, call centre workers face considerable stress. Weininger deduced that staff would find it calming to walk along a meandering curve rather than a straight pathway.

"Indeed, workers choose the serpentine path even when cutting directly between workstation clusters would use fewer steps," the architectural firm said.

"The call centre manager has found the path's soothing influence to be so beneficial that he likes to hold one-on-one meetings with employees while they walk on the path instead of sitting in his office."

White-noise generators hanging throughout the space, carpet tile on the floor and an acoustical treatment spray painted on the underside of the ceiling slab help attenuate noise levels.

The firm said a key factor in preserving the feeling of shared, open space on the immense floor plate is the placement of the "breakout" rooms, where staff can hold informal meetings and the like.

"The standard is to have a breakout room for every X number

of employees," Weininger said.

"Here, the priority was to leave the windows unobstructed to allow daylight to permeate the floor area. Instead of dispersing the breakout rooms, we concentrated them centrally around the core."

The same thinking drove the decision to use translucent fabric screens on the workstations.

Bell ExpressVu wanted 50-inch-high screens that would give the workers privacy when they were seated. But the traditional opaque screens available with conventional systems furniture would have blocked the daylight.

"Translucent screens are excellent for offices," Weininger said.

"No one likes being in a fish bowl. No one wants to have to look at someone, or have someone watch them, all day long. Translucent screens let you see shadows, so that you know when there is someone on the other side.

"You retain the feeling that you are part of the community but you don't have to look at the person on the other side if you don't want to be disturbed."

Voice, data and power cables are delivered through troughs with-

in the furniture system.

Even the locker area benefited from a major rethink. Space requirements for the 700 lockers were halved by specifying interlocking, L-shaped units, which line the service core.

Custom surface

To warm up the lockers' industrial-looking metal fronts, Weininger devised a custom laminate surface with a rust-and-green leaf pattern. Overhead, real ivy leaves proliferate on a pergola.

Deployed vertically, ivy climbs trellis-gridded walls that clad the four main core areas. The ivy walls serve as orientation devices within the massive call centre.

Workers have given the year-old facility a vote of confidence. In an industry plagued with churn, the call centre boasts an employee retention rate of 1.5 turnovers per seat per year versus the industry standard of four.

The project team included construction manager Drake & Associates and electrical and mechanical engineering consultants H.H. Angus & Associates.



View of office space at call centre.

Photo courtesy JULIAN JACOBS ARCHITECTS