



PHOTOS: DESIGN ARCHIVE/ROBERT BURLEY 1997



AN ARCHITECT'S REFLECTIONS ON A CORPORATE WORKPLACE

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PROLOGUE

While executing a small renovation early in my career, I had a life-altering experience. It was a corporate interior, completed 12 years ago by Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects (KPMB) and it has remained essentially unchanged.

When I started working at KPMB, I was 22 years old and during the eight years I spent there, I learned a great many life lessons from Tom Payne and Bruce Kuwabara. This project was the vehicle for a few of them, namely: natural light, interior piazzas and gump-tion — design priorities that have followed me since, and which I would characterize as absolute essentials for the design of an Architect's office.

THE BEGINNING

The corporate office interior project for CIBC Wood Gundy started in 1996. I was a twenty-five-year-old "just-happy-to-be-here" recent graduate, like many other young working architects in the mid-nineties. I was assigned to be project architect for a 3200-square-foot interior renovation for a client involved in private client banking for CIBC Wood Gundy. The project was the right size for one person to marshal from beginning to end and the project team was: Bruce Kuwabara and me.

The client was (and still is) an extremely successful investment specialist with a legendary track record. As a director, he had the opportunity to open a separate branch

for private client banking under his direction. Branches similar to this exist within the structure of banks to provide a more focused service for select private clients. So there were already precedents for the project.

THE CLIENT

I soon realized that Jay Smith was unique in many ways: an investment banker with a PhD, and a reputation as a discerning collector of contemporary art. He was also a close personal friend of Bruce's, with whom he had served on the board of The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery.

At the outset, Bruce told me that this project was small but very important and, because it was for a good friend, my "just-happy-to-be-here" attitude had to become "we're here to win this." You can't achieve great architecture if you're content with merely participating.

THE CLIENT GROUP

Jay Smith was one member of the client group. The others were the Interiors Department of CIBC (who oversee all construction matters for the bank) and Compliance. So, in addition to a very charismatic, successful and visionary client who would be the end user, we also had a Compliance Department and an Interiors Department to deal with.

Committees like this are typical of corporate clients. The bank is a massive entity, after all, and a publicly-traded company whose every detail is scrutinized by someone because it will be audited by another person in another department. There was (and probably still is) a formula for building branch offices, and saying that KPMB wasn't a part of the formula would be an understatement. We were black-suit-clad urban-dwelling designers with funky glasses and they were navy power-suit-types by day who retreated to suburbia in minivans, nightly. It was only because of Jay's unwavering support for KPMB (and the mild threat that he would jump ship to a competitor if he didn't get his way) that we were given the leeway to execute our proposal.

THE PROPOSAL — A SERIES OF COUNTERINTUITIVE GESTURES

The space is located in Toronto's Sunlife Centre, constructed in 1984 and characterized by 45-degree wedges bitten out of the all-glass perimeter. We were charged with all of the interior design, working drawings, permits, furniture and colours, etc. but we were chiefly concerned with light, circulation, interior public spaces and the integration of art into the workspace.

Our proposal was to link the perimeter executive offices and interior workstations by locating them on either side of an art

gallery/corridor with "interior piazzas" — client seating areas — at each end. The art corridor/gallery is effectively a widened circulation spine with contemporary art on one side. However, it functions more like an interior street (or linear piazza) — a public zone where interactions are encouraged.

For the Executive Offices, we proposed ultra-contemporary Italian office furniture (with an emphasis on clean lines) inside of a light filled office. Because the executive offices were on the glass perimeter (claiming all natural light) and parallel to the Art Spine, large panes of clear glass were added to the offices' interior walls, to bring light deep into the space for the benefit of the workstations.

Since a traditional executive banker's office of the day would be typically wood clad, with a big dark wood desk, we ran into a lot of initial resistance to our contemporary desk proposal: people were worried that it "wouldn't look rich enough." When we explained that the ultra-contemporary Italian office furniture was actually more expensive than the traditional wood

banker's desk with the "rich" image they sought, they were unmoved. It was the impression of wealth not the actual cost of things that mattered. But with the unwavering support of Jay Smith who, I was told later on, put his foot down in support of our furniture proposal, our ultra-contemporary Italian office furniture was accepted — another counterintuitive proposal that worked and still works.

HOW DID IT ALL WORK OUT?

Great design prevailed. The office was built and furnished pretty much as we'd designed it. It was a massive effort and a testament to persistence that has stood the test of time. Well, the pneumatic tube station is a bit of a relic, but when we did this project, email and the Internet were in their infancy. And yet 12 years later, it would be inconceivable to try to coordinate our "revisit" without the "Reply All" button and a BlackBerry.

As Bruce Kuwabara and I sat outside Jay's office, 12 years later, looking out at Festival Hall and the Bell Lightbox under

construction (a KPMB Project) we discussed how much the city has changed since this project was built. Life has changed too — we were bachelors when we did this project and we are now both married. Jay actually introduced Bruce to his wife.

This project was motivated not by zeitgeist, but by relationships, an idea and a lot of enthusiasm. Published here and abroad, used as a film set and, as recently as a month ago, the location for a CIBC commercial, the office is an extremely popular place to work. As an architect, now slightly older and much more seasoned, I can see that every office reflects the personality of its occupants. And I can't imagine an office that doesn't consider light, circulation and interior public spaces as central to the well-being of its occupants. When architects understand this, whether it is their own office or that of a client, the design process and the result are that much richer. ■

Anthony Provenzano is a Senior Architect at architectsAlliance and sole proprietor of Anthony Provenzano Architect in Toronto.

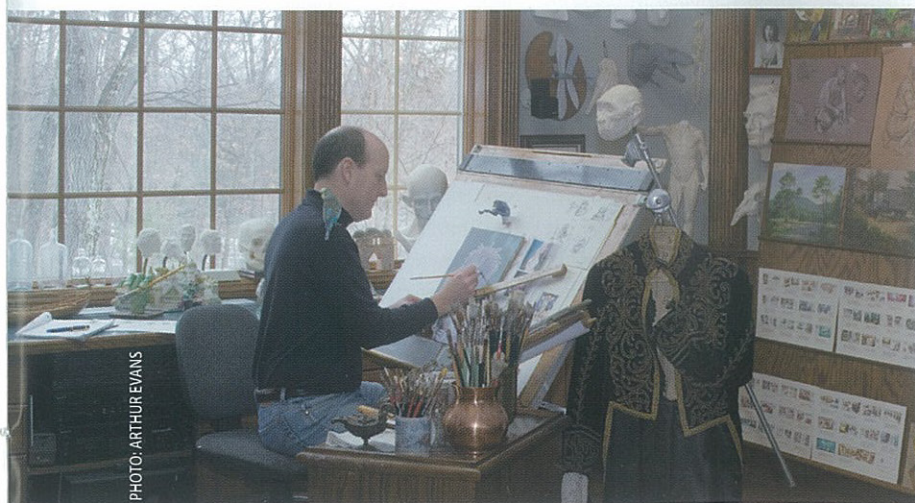


PHOTO: ARTHUR EVANS

JIM Gurney is an author and illustrator. But we asked him to send along some photos of his office because he works in a way that architects and illustrators used to, but don't anymore: by hand, in a comfortable studio, surrounded by elements of reference and inspiration. When he travels, which is frequently, he always has paints, pencils and a sketchbook at hand. He can finish a sketch in the time it takes

most of us to set up our camera. These sketches serve two purposes: to satisfy his endless curiosity and to serve as studies and inspiration for more detailed studio drawings.

For his more elaborate drawings, Jim assembles his reference material in his studio. This may include specially constructed physical models and maquettes, sketch studies and collected reference

A DRAWING STUDIO

GORDON S. GRICE OAA, FRAIC

photographs. For some of these photos, he may pose his friends and neighbours (and himself) in elaborate costumes, light them and photograph them. Frequently, he consults specialists in the areas that his drawings encompass.

You will find Jim's work in many places: *National Geographic* magazine, the Smithsonian Institution, the Norman Rockwell Museum and, most notably, in his books. His most recent publication, *Imaginative Realism* (Kansas City MO: McMeel Publishing, 2009), explains Jim's working method in much greater detail, but to see the work to its best advantage, be sure to consult the *Dinotopia* books.* ■

* An exhibition of 60 works from *Dinotopia* will be on view at the Delaware Art Museum from Feb. 6 to May 16. For Jim Gurney's books, go to www.dinotopia.com/dinotopia-store.html.