

DESIGNING A LEGACY

Third generation architect J. Robert Thibodeau's personal motto is: *Do great work! Make a difference! Have fun!* BY CHERYL MAH

AN ADVOCATE and teacher of sustainable development in architecture, J. Robert Thibodeau started practicing green design more than 15 years ago when it was still an idea and not well accepted.

Today environmentally responsible design is the norm rather than the exception. Looking back, Thibodeau believes that long established focus has been a strength for the firm and one of the reasons why clients seek their services.

"We have to look at how we do things so that we're energy conscious, health conscious and provide work spaces that are environmentally and mentally healthy," says Thibodeau, a LEED accredited professional. "We strongly advocate and implement recognized and innovative sustainable design practices in all our projects."

Thibodeau's passion for sustainability goes back to McGill University where he graduated with his Bachelor degree in Architecture in 1976. It was there that he was first exposed to environmentally responsible ideas.

"It's the detailing inside that makes that difference. We spend the better part of our waking hours inside of our workplace and that's why we feel that architecture interiors are very important," says Thibodeau, who also taught Energy and Environment in Buildings at McGill's School of Architecture as an adjunct professor for five years.

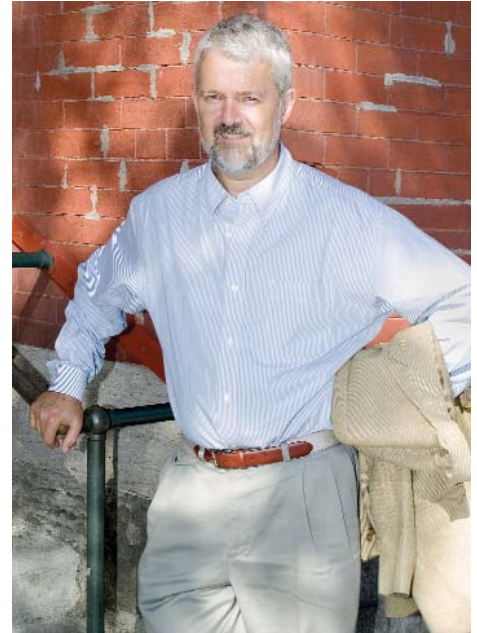
As principal of J. Robert Thibodeau Architecture and Design, Thibodeau leads a multidisciplinary team of architects, interior designers and technicians.

When Thibodeau started his own firm in Montreal in 1978, there was little architectural work available at the time. So he concentrated on interior renovations and then through several partnerships eventually moved into retail work and corporate interiors.

A partnership with Jon Sunderland to create SmartDesign bought Thibodeau out to Vancouver six years ago. Vancouver now serves as the corporate head office for the firm.

The affable 52-year-old Thibodeau describes his firm as a "small boutique company of designers with amazing ambitions." There's currently more than a dozen staff: nine in Montreal and five in Vancouver.

"Our plan is to have a dozen people in both cities by end of 2007. It means hiring close to one person every other month," he says, adding his goal in the next five to 10 years is to transition key staff into shareholders of the company.



Bell's Vancouver regional office at Bentall 5 garnered a 2005 Gold IDIBC Award of Excellence and an Environment Award.





Wooden mannequins are suspended from the ceiling at the Bell Mobility Call Center in Vancouver.

With the current skills shortage in the marketplace, Thibodeau acknowledges finding the right people to join the firm will be a challenge.

“It’s important that they can integrate well within the firm’s culture,” he says. “I’ve been lucky. People move here and are referred to us by people in Toronto and Montreal and they call us. We just grab them, especially if they’re being referred by people we know.”

Having the right people has also helped to build the strong foundations of the firm, he adds, noting in particular the contributions of Elias Merkins in Vancouver and Laurette Gagnon in Montreal.

Most of the firm’s work in Vancouver is corporate interiors, retail and project management/design build. Retail clients include Lululemon, Future Shop, Best Buy and Boutique Jacob. Operating from coast to coast, many of the firm’s clients are also national ones such as Bell Canada, Air Canada and VIA Rail Canada.

The firm is currently working on about 20 projects of varying scales ranging from \$150,000 to \$500,000.

“Our major focus at the moment is what we’re doing with Boutique Jacob — a major rollout of stores across the country simultaneously,” says Thibodeau. “As well we’re doing a lot of work with Bombardier.”

Thibodeau credits the firm’s almost 30 years of success to approaching each project based on loyalty, integrity and respect.

“Respect the budget, the schedule and the people you deal with. If we’ve been in business this long it’s because I feel people have entrusted us with their business,” says Thibodeau, who travels often across the country to see clients but spends the majority of his time in Vancouver.

A self-professed “former control freak,” Thibodeau is hands on in the firm and maintains personal involvement in all projects to ensure design continuity and cohesion with his team.

Career highlight projects for Thibodeau include Bell’s Vancouver regional office at Bentall 5 (which recently earned the design team a 2005 Gold IDIBC Award of Excellence and an Environmental Award) and the renovation of Place Ville-Marie’s Promenade located in the heart of Montreal.

While the firm strives to deliver projects with that extra *je ne sais quoi*, like any business, profit is a key goal.

Most of the firm’s work in Vancouver is corporate interiors, retail and project management/design build.



“We’re designers but we’re also in business. That’s a challenge...to be able to bring those two together and make it work,” says Thibodeau.

While the current robust marketplace is driving plenty of work for the entire building industry, rising construction cost and labour shortage are creating unprecedented pressures.

“The construction industry is dealing with very challenging times. What we need to see out there in the industry is — at all government levels — to make sure they’re not putting on the market projects that are going to compete with the private sector if the resources are not there,” says Thibodeau, adding he expects to see a market downturn in the fall of 2009.

Thibodeau is a member of the Quebec Order of

Architects, the Alberta Association of Architects and the Architectural Institute of British Columbia. In 1999 he was nominated a Fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada.

Born and raised in Montreal, Thibodeau is the youngest of four and a third generation architect.

“I guess I was raised in this environment where it was understood that I would be the architect in the family,” he says, with a laugh.

People, business development and designing are the most enjoyable aspects of the job for Thibodeau. Mentoring is important as well.

“I enjoy mentoring. I mentor my staff. I also have three people I’m mentoring as members of OAQ and AIBC. This is something I enjoy doing and believe in,” says Thibodeau, who is very actively involved in the industry.

He’s a past president of the Ordre des Architectes du Québec’s Environment Committee, a founding member of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada’s environmental committee, a former member of the Energy/Environment committee of the Association Québécoise de la Maîtrise de l’Énergie, and founding member of the Green Building Information Council.

Married for 30 years, Thibodeau has four children (three sons and a daughter). Although not architects, his children have worked for the firm in different capacities over the years.

“My wife has made it her life project to make sure that none of our kids are going to be an architect. But you don’t have to be an architect to be part of the firm,” laughs Thibodeau. □□

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