

# Height Advantage

*Ottawa Magazine* teams up with architect Christopher Simmonds to crank up the wow factor and energy in its new office space—a former Bell Canada switching station **By Sarah Brown**



**“I’VE FOUND THE SPACE!”** It was February 2007. Our offices had been sold four months previously, and staff had since been on tenterhooks, knowing we had to be out by the summer and wondering where we would end up.

“Yes, I’ve found the perfect space. We’re moving to Chinatown,” said St. Joseph Media’s Ottawa publisher Dianne Wing. “You have to go and see it.” A few days later I did, making an appointment with the receptionist of the security company whose offices would soon become our new home. From the outside, 43 Eccles Street made a great first impression. The 1927 brick building, a former Bell Canada switching station, was both imposing and majestic—the kind of building that doesn’t get built anymore.

**Tunnel vision:** The original entrance corridor then (**right**) and now (**above left**). The long corridor welcomes visitors into the office with images of recent magazine covers.

**Above right:** Floating and open, the reception desk is designed to act as the hub. The rounded corners are intended to pull visitors into the space. **Far right:** The 1927 building boasts strong street presence



## Design



**The view: (Right)** The view from the back of the office, looking toward the mezzanine, was originally one of unrelieved grey. **Above:** The same view today. The vibrant oranges and reds are invigorating and lively, while the glass railings allow staff working on the mezzanine to feel connected to officemates on the main floor. **Top:** The glass cut-outs continue along the side of the mezzanine with views down to the sales stations



Design: **Christopher Simmonds Architect**  
Furnishing and Design Support: **Creative Friction**  
Construction: **RND Construction**  
Office Furniture: **Teknion** (purchased through **Johnsons Business Interiors**)  
Reception desk: **Corian** (purchased through **Scodesign**)  
Carpet: **Interface**

My reaction on seeing the interior, however, was disillusionment. It's difficult to imagine, but despite being a huge open space (3,600 square feet with 16-foot ceilings), the place felt poky. The grey winter day magnified the effect. With all the shades pulled down, the office resembled a cavern rather than the lofty, light-filled space Wing had raved about finding. It briefly crossed my mind that if the publisher, who has worked for years in sales, could get my officemates to buy into this vision, it would be the ultimate selling job. The colour scheme was a drab grey and blue, the wall-off rooms were dark, and a closed-in mezzanine level gave the impression of being on the set of *Being John Malkovich*.

Architect Christopher Simmonds chuckles at the description. As a neighbour (the offices of Christopher Simmonds Architect are housed in an annex attached to 43 Eccles St.), he welcomed the opportunity to re-envision the security firm's space. "You guys are the polar opposite to the company you were replacing. From closed-down macho types, the place was going to become the offices of an open, creative, nurturing kind of organization," he says. "It was a real challenge to reflect that shift."

Simmonds' first order of business was to scribble out a rough map of where everyone would go. The task seemed daunting to Wing, who was finding it difficult to conceive of how a staff of 20, which includes four distinct, but interconnected, groups (management, magazine editors, art directors, and a sales team) would best fit into an open-concept space. But to Simmonds, the solution was straightforward. "I saw the space organizationally and spatially," he explains when asked how he determined almost instantly that the editors would be afforded some level of privacy on the mezzanine; the art directors would fan out along the back of the office, accessible to both the editors and the sales team; and the sales team's cubicles would run the length of the sunny western wall. The managers, meanwhile, were quickly divided up to be closest to the staff they worked with most frequently. The firm's Scott Hayward picked it up and carried it from there, taking the role of project architect and popping in and out of his adjacent office to supervise the construction.

**NOW THAT WE ALL KNEW WHERE** we'd be sitting, it was time to figure out how to make the place a whole lot less dark and grim. That's where Celeste Irvine-Jones, a partner in the interior-design firm Creative Friction, stepped in. "We had an early meeting to talk about colour," Simmonds remembers. "When I asked, 'Do you see yourself as corporate-office monochrome or eclectic,' everyone said, 'Eclectic! Colourful!'"

"Whenever I've worked with Celeste, she's always taken the colour idea and then cranked it up one more notch—or maybe two," Simmonds says with a chuckle. "I knew she'd be perfect."

Hayward conceived an office palette of strong shades designed to be invigorating and lively, then Irvine-Jones played with the intensity. A bold orange, lively green, rich eggplant, deep red, and soft powder blue all joined the mix. At the same time, because the office space was essentially one big room, Irvine-Jones took care to ensure that staff would feel a sense of being enveloped. To create that effect, she chose workstations that were neutral, the walls around them painted a soothing off-white. It's only when you look



**Disappearing act:** (Above) Once visitors passed the original reception desk, they were met with an austere wall. **Right:** Simmonds had the wall removed, thereby opening up the space and maximizing light. Creative Friction bumped up the liveliness with the cheerful green wall leading up the stairs to the mezzanine level



up that you see what Irvine-Jones calls “the glorious vistas”—dramatic “colour walls” and the clever layering of colour throughout the space.

Simmonds, meanwhile, got to work on the structure. His first order of business was revamping the long corridor leading to reception and transforming what had been a closed-in reception area into an open, welcoming space. Freshening up the corridor was relatively straightforward—new flooring, a coat of paint, spot lighting, and some art in the form of recent magazine covers. “It’s a bit *Alice in Wonderland*,” comments Simmonds, who likes the way the “tunnel” emerges into a new world—the very open reception area and office space. The walls around it were taken down to reveal a reception that now acts as the hub, the desk’s rounded corners intended to pull visitors in.

The second major design change happened on the mezzanine level, where Simmonds was at great pains to rid the space of its *Being John Malkovich* sensibility. To do so, he cut out big chunks of the railings around the mezzanine, replacing them with glass. “The ceiling up there felt omnipresent because there was no sense of groundedness,” he explains. Mezzanine dwellers didn’t get any feeling for the lofty space they were working in because they couldn’t even see the floor, just the ceiling. Now the

editors can see across to the building’s huge south- and west-facing windows, as well as down to their co-workers on the ground floor.

From there it was the myriad details—the lighting here, the decorative wooden panel there—that brought it all together. That’s where RND Construction came in, stepping in time and again with innovative ways to keep the project on budget without forgoing crucial design elements. At one point, the glass panels on the mezzanine were in danger of being chopped, operations manager Tami Sharp remembers. “We were just about to ditch the idea because it was too expensive when RND came up with a way to do them more cheaply but still to code,” she says. “They were amazing, changing things on the fly all the time. They even found stuff from Ikea a few times.”

Construction began in April and was completed just in time for a June move-in. In the five months since, no one at St. Joseph Media’s Ottawa office has looked back. Though we were tenants for nine years, the old office already seems a distant memory, the new office the invigorating way forward. But perhaps the architect describes the collective feeling most succinctly: “I’m pretty good at imagining what something’s going to look like, but it’s even better than I imagined.”

END

## DESIGN FILES

Algonquin College’s **Interior Design students** team up with **Ottawa Magazine** in an office design challenge that’s worth marks—and a \$200 prize from **Phillip Van Leeuwen**



Winners pose with *Ottawa Magazine* publisher Dianne Wing.

**Above** (l to r): Joe Whitmore, Heather Moro

and Haley Smith (Rebecca Tabbert is absent)

**Below** (l to r): Anita Mitton, Karma Alsaqqa, Jenny Neilson, Melinda Hazelwood



*Ottawa Magazine*’s recent redesign was more than just a big undertaking for us, it became a major project for students in the second year of Algonquin College’s Interior Design degree program. We provided eight teams of students with the specs for our new office and they went to town, coming up with eight unique perspectives on what our space should look like.

Competition was fierce, with the teams presenting their final office concepts to judges from St. Joseph Media’s Ottawa office as well as industry experts. Those concepts were fun, quirky, gorgeous—and practical, too!

**Congratulations to the two winning teams.**

*Each winner received a \$200 gift certificate courtesy of Phillip Van Leeuwen Furniture.*

