

By Kelly Rude Photography by Robert Burley, Alan Kaplan and Steven S. Miric

Elemental essentials

For clients as diverse as a Mexican ambassador, journalist Linda Frum and Toronto's School film-editing company, the Element Group provides cost-effective yet stylish design.

Perhaps it was their background, growing up behind Tito's "velvet curtain" in spartan, communist Yugoslavia. The three principals of Toronto's Element Group share a common belief in paring design down to the essentials of the bottom line. Trends for trends' sake are not for them.

The principals of the 15-year old firm met in Canada. Olga Mihailovich graduated from the School of Interior Design at Ryerson University, Sasha Josipovicz is a graduate of Toronto's International Academy of Design, and Milosh Pavlovic has a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Belgrade and a Master of Architecture from the University of Toronto.

The firm's residential client list contains international diplomats, including the Mexican Ambassador to the U.S.; European jet setters; and Canadian media personalities, including journalist Linda Frum and National Post editor Ken Whyte. "Working with designers has to be a collaboration," Whyte says. "Obviously one wants the input of someone

with experience and exemplary taste. However, with some designers it's more about them than it is about you. From my first conversation with Sasha, there was a willingness on his part to listen to what I felt I needed."

Element has recently completed the design of a condominium suite in the Windsor Arms Hotel, and has been involved with several renovation projects in Toronto's historical Rosedale district.

One project pitted the firm against now Governor-General Adrienne

Clarkson, who was trying to block renovation of a Victorian house in her Yorkville neighbourhood. With the support of neighbours, the Element Group's proposal was approved and work on the house continues.

Another project, now awaiting various levels of municipal approval,

will be to construct from the original 1960s drawings of the late Toronto architect Peter Dickinson a house for his widow on a controversial ravine lot in Rosedale. Dickinson designed Montreal's CIBC bank tower and the O'Keefe (now Hummingbird Centre) and the Benvenuto apartments in Toronto.

On the boards are construction of a contemporary-looking residence in Toronto's upscale Forest Hill district; homes in Palm Beach, Fla.; and villas on the Greek island of Corfu and on Harbour Island in the Bahamas.

The firm's corporate work includes law firms in Toronto as well as the northern Ontario cities of Timmins and Sudbury; and head offices in Toronto for Jamieson Laboratories, Women's Television Network and The National Post.

Less than a year ago, Element created a modest office in midtown Toronto for Red Apple Entertainment, a start-up film-production company. The space involved 2,800 square feet in a 1970s office building; the budget was a cautious \$100,000, or \$28 per square foot.

The goal was to create a setting that was simple and understated, with the aim of attracting a particular kind of employee and client. Construction involved the removal of a standard T-bar grid of ceiling panels, painting out the exposed ceiling, covering the concrete floor with



Facing page: Element Building. Renovation of 19th century industrial building produced three floors of mixed use space. The ground floor boardroom is exposed to the street. Above: Element Building. Glass glazed boardroom at front; entranceway with door to upper floors, at right. Photos by Steven S. Miric.



Left: Element Building. Ground floor reception area; view through screen to boardroom. Right: Element Building. A ground floor private meeting room; the concrete-block stairwell doubles as back wall. Photos by Steven S. Miric.

sea grass, and installing Ikea office furniture.

Built into the design program was the flexibility to reconfigure the office space as the company grows. Within its first year, Red Apple is already working at capacity. The foyer will soon be reworked to include space for a receptionist; walls that were strategically located in an open-office concept will support partitions to accommodate various staff ensembles. These minor interventions will facilitate simple leasehold-improvement requirements for the next tenant.

School, a Toronto film-editing company, is another Element Group project where the client wanted high style to take a back seat to low-key comfort. Humour as a design device was selected instead.

One enters the reception area of School directly from the elevator and is immediately greeted by a horizontal silver frame containing grade-school pictures of the firm's owners. Above these pictures hangs a 1950s portrait of Queen Elizabeth II; below is a row of well-used coat hooks. A well-worn map of the world hangs on another wall. The designer's role was to interpret this culture, including the obvious irony behind the name of the company, as accurately as possible.

The plan was to create a relaxed environment that played up the existing maple floors and posts and beams (the building was originally a factory). The client required an open kitchen; furniture requests included a pool table and cottage-type furniture in living-room settings. Staff and clients can easily spend 12 to 14 hour days in the facility, so tension release is paramount. The atmosphere is casual, so much so that clients help themselves to refreshments from the open kitchen.

The same maple veneer and steel finishes were used for the reception desk and kitchen counter. Eight-foot-high, brushed-steel doors, some with sandblasted glass, were installed throughout, and second-hand Herman Miller Aeron chairs were purchased at auction.

The brief presented to Pavlovic and Mihailovich, the partners-in-



charge, included the upgrading and rerouting of electrical and mechanical systems. The challenge was to create a decidedly low-tech facility for a company using high-tech editing equipment. The designers responded by creating a room to house the mechanical and electrical systems as well as the massive computer hardware; they positioned the room in the centre of the open space and sheathed it in corrugated plastic. Exposed cable trays and large unpainted galvanized steel ducts, installed close to the ceiling, run from the central control room to the editing suites on the periphery.

"I did not have a visual in mind when we started on School," Mihailovich says. "The project was primarily about the function and the total utilization of the space. Given the rents in downtown Toronto, every square foot had to be put to valuable use."

Both these office projects were designed to evolve with the clients' business, while keeping costs to a minimum.

A high-end hospitality project, a Latin supper club appropriately called Cha Cha Cha, located in Toronto's theatre district, has gone through several incarnations since it opened in 1995. What is significant in this project, in addition to the built-in program for change, is that images of the original, elegantly rich design don't overtly reflect specific trends of the time, and still read as current.

"Carefully planned perspective views recall Baroque inspirations, providing the necessary figurative components of a richly associative interior architecture composed of extravagant imagery and rich surface effects," says Pavlovic, the partner-in-charge. The \$1.2-million budget included Karelian birch burl veneer from Finland, Indian slate, sinks and faucets by Starck, fibre optics set in acrylic, Donghia furniture and Fornasetti wallpaper. The project was published in international journals, including Tokyo's *Wind*. The Canadian design journal *Insite* referred to the project as an "admirable balance of abstraction and representation, novelty and restraint."

This signature expression of novelty and restraint is also at work in another hospitality project, Goldfish, a Mediterranean-Asian restaurant on Bloor Street in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood. Josipovicz met his

client, Abdi Gothb, in a trendy Queen Street West clothing boutique run by Gothb and his partner. Josipovicz was shopping for "something in baby blue." Shortly thereafter, Element received a commission to design a restaurant for Gothb in the not-so-trendy area of Bloor and Spadina. The colour palette for the restaurant includes several pastels, including Sasha's favoured blue. "The project is about the innocence of the blue and the quality of freshness," Josipovicz says. "Freshness was the leitmotif."

From the street, the glass-fronted restaurant evokes a large, pristine fish tank. Drinking water arrives with cranberries floating in the glasses; exotic fresh fruit and vegetables are styled into cutouts on the wall. Wait-staff move about in baby-blue shirts. The narrow room is immensely popular, yet even when crowded with patrons it still feels light, thanks to the restrained pastel palette and the generous use of glass.

Lightness was also achieved with the use of glass in the Element Building on Markham Street. The firm bought and renovated a 19th-century warehouse located just off busy College Street in downtown Toronto, creating three floors of residential and commercial space.

Little intervention was necessary with the exterior façade. Part of the front was removed to accommodate separate entrances to the main- and upper-floor units. The glazing functions as the new exterior wall on the ground floor, bringing light into the space and demarcating a spectacular, jewel-box-like office that is exposed to its residential street.

Roller blinds on the office periphery, when open, expose a crystalline office with polished-concrete floor, white ceiling and walls, a white, opaline-glass screen and white Eames Aluminum Group chairs around a large rectangular Norman Foster glass-topped table, flanked by Louis XIV armchairs upholstered in white cotton. The single artwork is a six-panel, Piranesi engraving of a Roman monument, mounted horizontally instead of vertically. Here is the freshest interior I have seen in Toronto for some time.

The building was gutted during the \$600,000 renovation. Because there were no structural interior walls, Element was able to make the most of the building's narrow footprint. On the main floor, a narrow corridor leads from the reception area to the washroom, kitchen, private meeting room and studio, and ends in a bamboo garden at the back. Fire code required a central stairwell to service the two upper floors. Made of concrete block, it sits back from the main entrance.

The clear thinking behind the project produced three floors of workspace. If Element ever sells the building, the template is there for mixed use. Kitchens and bathrooms are already in place; the upper two floors have a mix of commercial and residential tenants.

In this building as well as in its client projects, Element Group shows that good design is about fiscal responsibility more than high style.

Sources:

Element Building:

Contractor: Element Group

Chairs: Plank, ICF from Nienkamper; Charles Eames Aluminum Group, Vitra from Beaton Agencies; Louis XIV armchairs, settee, L'Antan, Place de Vosges, Paris

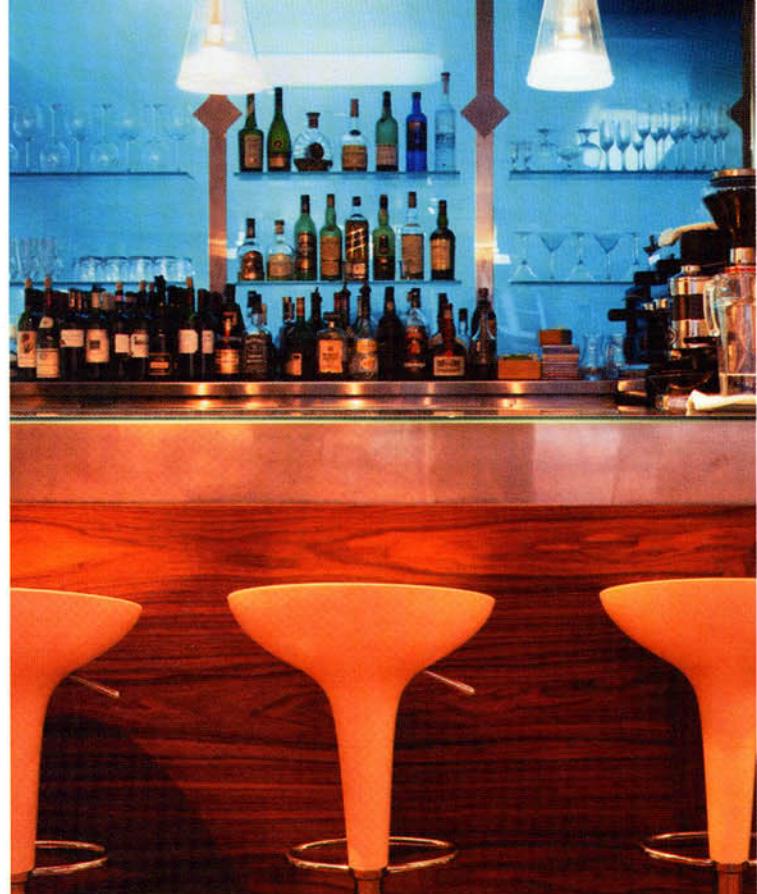
Engraving: Piranesi copper; Sothebys, London

Lighting: Eurolite, Union Electric

Screen: Dalco & Recon

Tables: Norman Foster Nomos, Tecno from Treide Design; Le Corbusier, Palazzetti; Korean rain drum, Artifacts, Hong Kong

Goldfish:



Above: The bar at Goldfish restaurant with a translucent glass wall to kitchen. Photo by Alan Kaplan. Below: Cha Cha Cha supperclub. A Mural is painted on the wall behind dance floor; washrooms are situated behind fireplace wall. Photo by Robert Burley.





Above: School Editing. The control room sheathed in corrugated plastic with exposed cable trays and ducts at ceiling level; casual living room furniture is grouped on original maple floors. **Below:** School Editing. Entranceway, reception and kitchen. **Below right:** Red Apple Entertainment. Reception area, with passageway to office suites. Photos by Steven S. Miric.

Furniture: Triede Design, Kiosk
Lighting: Eurolite
Walnut veneer: General Woods & Veneers
Cha Cha Cha:
Contractor: Paul Kaskens Construction
Lighting: Eurolite
Karelian Birch veneer: General Woods & Veneers
Mural: Justine Monaco
Stainless Steel: V.N. Metal
School Editing:
Chairs: Aeron by Herman Miller, Wassilly by Knoll
Contractor: David Aaron Associates
Lighting: Union Electric
Red Apple Entertainment:
Bamboo garden: Heather Yang
Carpet: Perfection Rug
Contractor: John Ekker Construction
Fountain: Nature's Element
Lighting: Eurolite

