

# CAREERS

THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 1998

## Designing elegance

### ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

An occasional series on successful small business

With clients like the Château Laurier, the hard work of Tim Davis is paying off.

BY NAHILAH AYED

It's hard to walk by the bar at Zoe's Lounge at the Château Laurier without taking a closer look.

The recent transformation of the bar, with its beautiful stained Canadian maple, was so impressive that it's no surprise that its designer Tim Davis has also been commissioned to renovate the Château Laurier's Wilfrid's Grill.

The understated elegance of the Château Laurier is a perfect canvas for the work of Mr. Davis, who has slowly built himself a thriving design business in a matter of about three years.

Timothy J. Davis Design has been commissioned by such clients as the National Gallery, Nortel, Canada Trust and many others to do jobs ranging from complete renovations, to millwork, interior design and furniture design, to landscaping and project management.

About three years ago, Mr. Davis emigrated to Canada from England looking for work opportunities. He had spent nearly 12 years at university in England, studying first structural engineering, then architecture. Before coming to Ottawa, he had already established a design practice in Leyland, England, but decided in 1995 to move and establish himself here.

After spending the first while working with Murray and Murray Associates Inc., he decided to once again strike out on his own.

"It was terrible at first because I did not know anybody," said Mr. Davis, 36. "But I had to do what I do, because I'm very dedicated to doing it and can't imagine doing anything else."

One of the biggest problems early on, as with most start-up businesses, was cash flow.

"Very often it wasn't a question of absolute money, but a question of what's flowing in at the present time. With a small business that's trying to grow, that is sometimes a problem.

"Your income also fluctuates wildly up and down. You somewhat get used to it, but I was very fortunate."

Since Day 1, Mr. Davis has had steady work: His main specialties — interiors and millwork — are not satu-



PHOTO BY MICHAEL, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

**Tim Davis, owner of Timothy J. Davis Design, started his own business about three years ago. His main specialties are interiors and millwork.**

rated markets in Ottawa.

He also quickly got to know some key people in the industry who began to seek his help and provided him with those first few crucial projects. His growth since then has been the product of word of mouth, he said.

"Advertising doesn't work at all, and nobody picks a designer from the Yellow Pages. Those people I worked with introduced me to others, it's all been word of mouth," said Mr. Davis.

Of course, Mr. Davis's best advertising is in the form of his previous work. Even his own apartment in New Edinburgh — from which he runs his business — is a statement of what he is capable of creating: virtually all the elegant pieces of furniture were designed and made by him.

"It's deliberately very tight and efficient because it needs to be a showcase for what I do," said Mr. Davis. "Of course it's also my own pet project."

**'I just want to keep plugging away and do nice quality work, and at the end of the day have satisfied customers come back to us for more. If you manage to do that you can't fail.'**

Tim Davis

Running his work out of his home is symbolic of the approach Mr. Davis has to the business. He only has two people who work regularly with him on a contract basis and wants to keep his operation as tight as possible.

"I've no desire to grow very large. I've learned a lot of lessons from the recession in the '80s from those who took out long leases and struggled. I have no huge ambitions to be a really big practice."

"The biggest challenge is balancing the administrative and marketing costs against the fee earning time," said Mr. Davis. "You spend time going out trying to meet people and win work and it's dead time because you're not fee earning."

"It would be easier if you have 10 staff working away in the office, but not when it's just you and a couple of contract staff."

One of his most impressive projects is a collaboration last year with Gaston Lavoie Ltd., on a stately meeting room table for the Embassy of Indonesia on Parkdale Avenue.

Mr. Davis pays attention not only to clients' needs in the material and design, but also to symbols that add a traditional touch or point to an owner's heritage.

"We tried to mix their cultural influences and symbolism with Canadian craftsmanship and materials, and it seemed to work quite well," he said of the 3.6-metre wide oak table he made for the embassy. The table was inlaid with five lacquer veneer circles to represent the five symbols of the Indonesian state.

That's the kind of work Mr. Davis would like to do more of.

"I'd like to continue servicing the commercial sector and the public sector. I'd also like to do more embassy work. I find it very interesting to work with different cultures."

He's also hoping being in Silicon Valley North will also mean he might win work with the high-tech sector.

"I've travelled a lot, but Ottawa is totally unique. It's big enough to have all the wonderful facilities, like the art gallery, but small enough that it's got none of the problems that most large capitals have."

Meanwhile Mr. Davis loves what he does.

"I just want to keep plugging away and do nice quality work, and at the end of the day have satisfied customers come back to us for more. If you manage to do that you can't fail."