

Kramer Design Associates Ltd.

Creator of a modern blend of media and architecture that is distinctly its own

by Luigi Benetton

Toronto street furniture, of all things, has taken a turn for the modern. New-look metal-and-wood benches, eye-catching glass transit shelters sporting cantilevered roofs, and trash/recycling bins with pedal-operated lids add practical design flourishes.

These street-level touches of elegance are the visions of Kramer Design Associates Ltd. (KDA).

One challenge KDA faces is making space for people on Toronto's mostly narrow sidewalks. Following a streetscape photo audit, KDA noticed newspaper boxes can take up as much as 30 linear feet. So the company is pushing the city to abandon the one-newspaper/one-box paradigm in favour of coordinated double-height units that take up half the sidewalk space. "We want to make street furniture lighter, more transparent," explains Jeremy Kramer.

Kramer, KDA's owner and creative director, counts winning the Toronto street furniture program contract in 2007 as a milestone for the firm. Over the program's 20-year duration, Astral Media, on behalf of the City of Toronto, will build and install more than 26,000 pieces of street furniture.

Kramer marketed the achievement internationally and won contracts in 2009 for the City of Mumbai, India, and for The Pearl, a 985-acre man-made island in Doha, Qatar, featuring luxury residential, hospitality, retail and entertainment.

Doha promises plenty of, in Kramer's words, "dynamic and exciting infrastructure projects happening all over the city" especially since it will host the FIFA World Cup in 2022. KDA has already designed a comprehensive digital media network for The Pearl Doha's exclusive residential development.

In 2010, KDA won the street furniture design contract for the Regional Municipality of York, a suburb north of Toronto.

Toronto-based KDA counts its home town as one of its most important clients, one to which it brings ideas from other places around the world. "We recently did Toronto's first automated washroom, not far from the Rogers Centre," says Kramer. While commonplace in countries like Switzerland and England, this pay-to-use facility is still a novelty here. "The City said it's become a tourist attraction of sorts," Kramer notes.

To understand the mind behind the 45-year-old alumnus of the Ontario College of Art and Design, it helps to explore both nature and nurture. His father, Burton, originally from New York, is a geometric abstractionist painter. His Swiss-born mother, Irène, did textile soft sculpture and textile wall hangings and was involved in children's fashion for many years. Kramer's uncle, an illustrator and artist, ran ad agencies in Switzerland and Germany.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as a child Kramer spent hours each day drawing. He describes his compositions as not based on the literal, but as always having "some fantastical quality to them," he recalls. "It had more to do with ideas. It's part of how I think."

"How do you take something that

might be expected and make it unexpected?"

It's a question Kramer continues to ask. "When firms come to us, they want something entirely custom, unusual, that will help them differentiate themselves from their competitors."

While he credits unconventional thinking as one pillar of KDA's success, it can prove double-edged. He recalls the 2001 process of creating consensus for Toronto's new transit shelters, for instance. He can easily list practical reasons for the design, but when he first presented the concept, "it took some convincing to make everybody believe that such a significant change could work, could be functional, could be practical. One challenge in doing unusual projects is to make everybody feel confident and comfortable with making the leap."

"It's about doing the research, showing examples of projects that have been done elsewhere in the world, to show a conceptual direction, to provide a really solid rationale."

Kramer didn't face that need to justify his work when he pursued his first love. "After high school, I worked in Switzerland with my cousin to make an animated film," he recalls, "strongly believing that was the direction I was going to take." He and his cousin won first prize for short films from the Festival du Film D'Animation Prix Unigram, Zurich, Switzerland in 1984, completing thousands of artwork images in only five months' time.

"After that, I concluded that the type of animation I wanted to do would be seen, more often than not, by other animators," he says. "Although it was very gratifying to do that kind of work and receive praise, the idea of doing public work that could affect people's daily lives seemed more meaningful."

That epiphany eventually led Kramer to Toronto's Burton Kramer & Associates, founded in 1968 by his father, Burton (who has since moved on to his painting). "It was a very different type of business when I started," he says. "Corporate identity was the focus."

Other types of firms started to crowd the market for corporate identity services, so Kramer let his interest in the three-dimensional aspect of brand integration guide him as he remade KDA's DNA. Today, the firm offers three types of core service: signage and wayfinding, media architecture and street furniture.

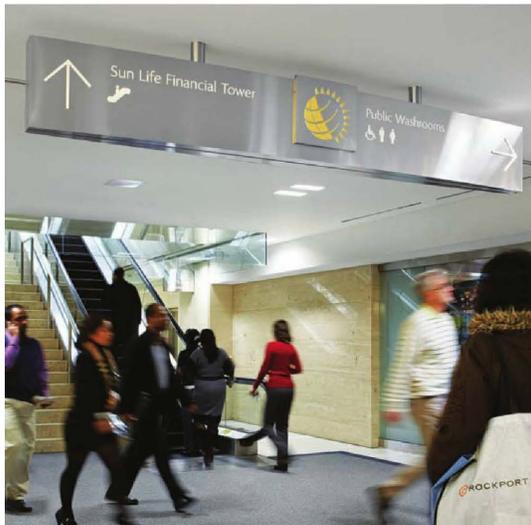
The firm's services became highly specialized, requiring a wide range of design skills and technical knowledge. KDA's current 15-person team consists of industrial, architectural, new media and graphic designers. "We have people from Canadian universities and colleges, as well as people with an international education and background to bring a global perspective," says Kramer. "That's helpful since, in the last number of years, much of our work comes from elsewhere in the world."

Fielding international work calls for collaboration outside the firm that's as effective as that which occurs within. "We're striking strategic alliances with firms based in other countries and cities that do work complementary to ours and have clients that look for services that we offer," he explains.

"We handle more than half our work out of the Toronto office, but we travel to do consultation and work with the local groups to handle implementation."

Media architecture went large scale thanks to KDA's signature installations at Toronto's heavily travelled Yonge-Dundas intersection, aka Dundas Square, which features a 150-foot-





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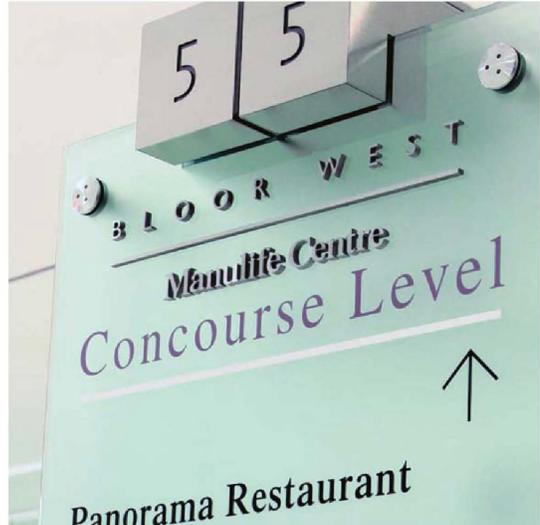
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JENN AURICH

Clockwise from top left: Sun Life Financial Tower, Toronto; 18-storey multimedia entertainment tower for Toronto's Eaton Centre; City of Toronto transit shelter; world's largest LED video display, Saudi Arabia; outdoor media revenue-generating displays, The Pearl, Doha, Qatar; coordinated signage and wayfinding program, Manulife Centre, Toronto. Opposite page: multimedia signage, Maple Leaf Square, Toronto.

tall, five-screen multimedia tower at the north end of the iconic Eaton Centre mall, plus additional screens atop the nearby Hard Rock Café and on the more recently built 10 Dundas, home to businesses like Google Canada.

Built in 2005, the Eaton Centre multimedia tower perhaps best reflects the advantage of KDA's multidisciplinary team. A variety of technologies went into the structure, which can coordinate its displays to show one thing or broadcast different things on each screen. (The Eaton Centre multimedia tower may be the tallest in Canada, but KDA also designed the world's largest for Prince Alwaleed's Saudi Arabia Kingdom Centre development.)

Kramer's pursuits in animation are helpful when designing multimedia structures. "There's a variety of dynamic content," he says. "You need to understand show and entertainment."

Dundas Square is also home to T.O. Tix, a not-for-profit that sells last-minute theatre tickets. T.O. Tix suffered poor visibility prior to KDA's pro bono redesign, which Kramer describes as a 'give-back' to the community. "We are big supporters of the arts," he says. "It's a nice way for us to help get more people in seats for performances."

Kramer understands that the general public may not recognize 'wayfinding', but it is in use every day. It is one of KDA's core areas of practice that continues to be in demand both locally and internationally.

"No matter how excellent the building, people must be able to navigate. It seems like a little thing, but research has shown that while a facility can excel in every category, if people can't find their way around, that will negatively affect their overall impression of the place."

"People need to identify where they are, to acknowledge that they've left one area and are entering another, and that they've arrived when they do."

"We design wayfinding strategies to look integrated with a streetscape, a piece of architecture, an interior environment, so it looks seamless," Kramer explains, "not imposed after the fact."

"This type of work often becomes the visual thread that ties the inside to the outside, branding both the facility and the experience."

It can also tie specific districts together. Working with the Toronto Entertainment District, one of the city's largest BIAs, KDA helped to define the BIA's five unique downtown districts

and they're designing colourful banners for each area reminiscent of those designating centuries-old wards in Siena, Italy.

For all the interest such banners generate, Kramer figures digital signage will increasingly take over from static ones, and he figures that trend will open up fascinating possibilities for project owners. "The minute you do anything digital, you become a broadcaster," he says. "Your displays need to be continuously fed with content. Why not create art content for the screens? Why not take the art contribution budget for the development and work with a series of video installation artists to create some really interesting content?"

Kramer put these questions to Pen Equity, the original developer of 10 Dundas, and then offered an answer. "We encouraged the developer to work with Ryerson University's video department, to make a financial commitment to produce new content and amass a 'library' of video shorts to broadcast, interspersed with advertising," he says.

"We've started to pursue this idea more and more on our projects," Kramer continues. "Think of good newspapers, good magazines or your favourite TV channel. Part of what makes them successful is great editorial, great photography, excellent content. And advertisers want to align themselves with great content. The future of dynamic signs is similar. They need to broadcast exciting content that captures and holds people's attention." ■