



50 Ann St. Boutique Condominium
Interior rendering

BRINGING
Balance and Harmony
TO NEW BUILDINGS

Written by Nate Hendley

A little over two decades ago, Rod Rowbotham had a disconcerting experience while viewing a new building near Toronto.

"In the late 1990s, I was designing a condominium in Mississauga. It was 24 storeys. The outside of the building was one expression and yet when you walked inside the building, the lobby looked like it was from a different era. The materials were different, the feeling was different, the connectivity between the exterior and the interior was jarringly different," remembers Rowbotham, CEO, President, and Principal Architect of onespace unlimited inc., based in Vaughan, Ontario.

The encounter reinforced his belief that the best way to achieve optimal results in new residential developments is for architects and interior designers to work closely together. Such a "harmonized design approach," as he calls it, is central to onespace unlimited's mission. Blending architectural and interior design services in a single business has proven hugely popular, and onespace has completed a series of high-profile, award-winning projects.

Employing architects and interior designers in the same firm might seem radical, but it is actually a reboot of a practise that was once common, says Rowbotham. At the start of his career as an architect in the 1980s, he worked for an architectural firm that maintained an interior design department.

For various reasons, these disciplines separated within the industry, something he was determined to change. In 2000, as part of the ownership team that took over the company that became onespace, "the first thing I did was hire an interior designer," he recalls.

"You have to have a common vision to produce a very strong product, if you want to call it that," he says. "If you don't have a strong vision that takes into account how a person experiences the building, you run the risk of a disjointed result, and that's where I'm coming from with the harmonized approach. When you get these two disciplines working together early on, it just becomes a very organic and smooth transition from one discipline to the next," says Rowbotham. ►►





►The company’s architectural and interior design teams work collaboratively on residential projects about 90 percent of the time, while occasionally, a client might already have an architect or designer of their own. Most projects centre on multi-family residences, including townhomes and mid-rise and high-rise apartments.

onespace traces its roots to a firm called Atkins Architect, founded in 1964. After Rowbotham and the new owners took charge, the company went through a few name changes and ultimately rebranded as onespace unlimited inc. in 2008. This name affirms that the company has “architects and interior designers working together in one space,” he says.

“We still have a connection to the history of the company, in that many of the buildings that we did under the previous ownership we still get calls for, because they still exist. People are asking for drawings [or] asking if we can do an addition.”

“You have to lead, you have to be humble, and you have to listen. When you do all those three things in combination, you are really aligned with the client’s business needs.”

With the company’s heritage stretching back 60 years, it has a significant corporate anniversary coming up next year. “I would suggest that it’s the personality and character of the company [that’s been our point of difference],” says Rowbotham. “Ultimately, at the end of the day, architects and interior designers are service providers. Service providers have to lead conversations with their clients so they can inform the client to the point where they can make an informed decision,” he says of how the company has survived and thrived over the decades.

Leadership also involves listening to the client and hearing out their expectations, vision, and budget boundaries. “You have to

lead, you have to be humble, and you have to listen. When you do all those three things in combination, you are really aligned with the client’s business needs,” Rowbotham says.

This team-based perspective also helps to inform the company’s approach to mentorship. With workforce shortages looming industry-wide, onespace makes it a point to hire and work with students, providing the next generation with the tools, insights, and opportunities they need to succeed in the field.

The company has completed a number of diverse projects, including the Hunt Club, an eight-storey, 80-unit residence in Toronto that earned onespace multiple honours. The Hunt Club won the BILD Award 2015 for Best Suite Design over 1,500 square feet and was a finalist for a BILD Award 2017 for Best Mid-Rise Building Design (the Building Industry and Land Development Association issues BILD honours to recognize innovative homes in the Greater Toronto Area).

The Hunt Club was also runner-up for the Ontario Home Builders’ Association 2017 Most Outstanding Mid-Rise Building award and was nominated for the EIFS (Exterior Insulation Finish Systems) Council of Canada 2020 Architectural Design Award.

“That project was an interesting one; the design came out very easily. We had an exceptionally good relationship working with the city planning department,” Rowbotham says of the Hunt Club.

“Another one that I’m proud of—and it’s only five storeys—is 50 Ann St. Boutique Condominiums. It sits really well within its context. It’s in the older part of downtown Bolton, Ontario, and it reflects the context of the heritage of the area. It picks up on the colour of the brick from some farm homes that are just down the street... It harmonizes with its surroundings in my opinion quite well.” At 74,860 square feet, the 50 Ann St. Boutique Condominiums offer 73 units for residents.

From its office in Vaughan, onespace has worked as far afield as Calgary, Alberta. The majority of projects, however, are

performed in Southern Ontario, “between Hamilton and Pickering and as far north as Orillia,” reports Rowbotham.

In keeping with its progressive ethos, the company uses leading-edge tools such as Autodesk Revit 3D modeling software. “We’ve been recently advancing our interior rendering capacity so that we’re basically showing the client the way we see the building, rather than a simplified, 2D representation. We’re showing it to them in 3D, rendered with people and all kinds of context,” he explains.

This June, he attended NeoCon, a design industry trade show in Chicago where he participated in a virtual reality presentation with other staff. “We were blown away by it. You put the headset on and you’re actually inside the space. This is something we’re strongly considering as a goal for the future—to get into that kind of thing and be able to walk through a space in-person. It’s a very powerful tool,” Rowbotham shares.

In addition to attending NeoCon and other trade shows, onespace maintains an active social media presence. However, “in terms of how we promote the company, a lot of times it’s just word of mouth. I would say most of the time, our firm has been referred to someone.”

The company stays abreast of industry issues, with one of the most pressing, at present, being lack of affordable housing. Housing prices across Ontario have been skyrocketing, in part because many people want to live in the province but there is limited land available for the construction of large, new communities.

Rowbotham’s solution is density: to build higher. “A 25-storey building used to be a tall building,” he says. “Now it’s 50, 60, 70 storeys, because the pressure to build up is real.” He foresees a trend favouring the construction of high-rises over single-family homes within Ontario. This works well for onespace, given the company has a series of on the go involving heights in excess of 30 storeys.

The recent COVID pandemic did not have a significant impact on onespace, as the housing industry itself didn’t shut down. Some staff members worked from home, meetings moved from in-person to online, and other precautions were taken; now, with the pandemic hopefully receding, the company still offers a hybrid work program that enables participating employees to work remotely.

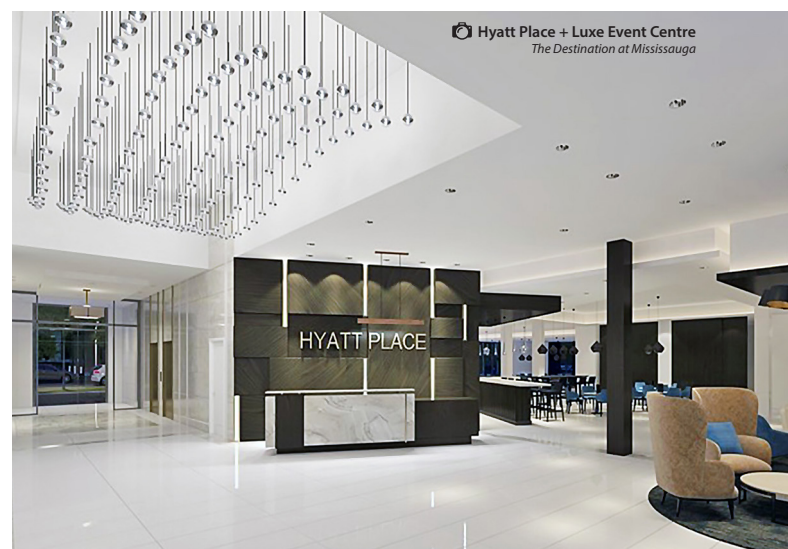
The firm currently has a team of around 25 employees. Having the proper technical education and background are obvious prerequisites, but onespace also looks for other qualities in new hires. “The most important thing is fit; I look for people who are

genuine. We are not a pretentious organization—not pretending to be something else. We’re looking for people who have similar values.”

With the company currently in growth mode, Rowbotham says it can be difficult to find “employees that are connected to us in terms of our value system,” another area where students have an advantage, as they can be trained and immersed in the company’s culture from the start. “I think that’s the biggest challenge, to find someone who is likeminded that really wants to become part of the community here and wants to grow with us. The career opportunities are very strong with the company because we give people a lot of responsibility.”

Going forward, the firm is considering adding new services. onespace currently offers project management, for example, but only on assignments for which it has been retained. There are discussions underway about offering project management as a standalone service. “It’s a consideration but there’s been no decision,” reports Rowbotham. In five years, he says, “I would love to see us 40 and 50 people, with a broader management structure and bigger opportunities for fulfilling the needs the province has.” ■

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