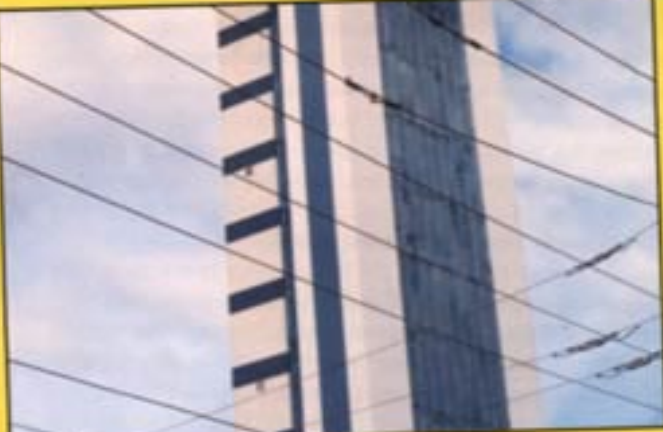


Thinking

BIG



The first impression of a visit to AyA kitchens is surely the lasting one. Driving down the crowded industrial street you can't really believe your eyes when you spot the company sign atop a seventeen-storey tower not unlike a flight control tower of a busy airport. Turns out that the building belonged to an elevator manufacturer who used it to test its own products. Now there is a showpiece working kitchen and corporate reception area that provides a splendid view of downtown Toronto and the shores of Lake Ontario in Mississauga.

Dave Martin thinks as big as his tower. Recently returned from a long stint in the US selling for one of Canada's major cabinet manufacturers, his vision of a super hi-tech cabinet plant is becoming real. Starting out at about 100,000 square feet is one of several indicators of Dave's vision of grandeur. The absence of a large staff is the other most predominant indicator; sophisticated materials handling systems and very fine new machinery allow the firm to produce a substantial output with a minimum number of employees. Although the factory is just gearing up, the initial output and quality is very impressive.

David and Jean Marcus understood Dave Martin's vision and little expense was spared to build the facility. This new venture marks the return of the Marcus family to the cabinet industry; David and Jean's parents founded Canac Kitchens,

Canada's largest cabinet manufacturer. Their uncle owns Normac, another of Canada's most successful cabinet manufacturers. There is no extravagance here; the contrary is true. If it can be said there is an 'ambiance' in a manufacturing plant, one has been created here. Skylights have been added to increase the natural light on the shop floor. Colourful posters and departmental signs have been strategically located not to impress visitors but to add to the 'décor' and motivational impact. The wide aisles and traffic pattern are an intentional effort to build an efficient manufacturing facility that was really unlike any cabinet factory that I have visited before. It is much more akin to an office furniture maker where hands-off production is essential to profitability. "The game has changed," Dave Martin says.



AYA Kitchens re-invents the cabinet business in Canada.



The manufacturing line is the brainchild of Peter Loerke whose industrial history is in the office furniture business; his face beams with pride at my praise. "Just let me know if there are any questions you need answered...technical information and the like", he tells me. And you know that he loves to talk technical. The place runs like clockwork even though the first kitchen was delivered in July.

Panels travel along a roller conveyor through the edge bander. The first operation is to trim the sawcut edge with a tenoner to allow for a smoother edge. Now, in most plants this would be considered an unnecessary extravagance but at AyA, the emphasis is on the unexpected – and why not? No additional personnel are required for the operation, just a machine that produces a superior edge. The panel continues its journey and is automatically flipped 180 degrees to allow the opposite edge to be banded down the line. The edgeband line alone is 250 feet long and operators at either end communicate with headset walkie-talkies. Panels exit like stuff from a goose.

Ann Sheridan, Manager of Product Development is stationed in a bright office overlooking the plant. Designing 'the old fashioned way' - on paper on a drafting table with a pencil - Ann was surprised at the local office stationers not knowing



what 'vellum' actually was. Her designs are classical in approach. The product line has a solid contemporary flair but is completely accessible and designer-friendly, is created primarily for developers who build condos and multi-home projects. With a good door selection, an adequate complement of trims and mouldings, a kitchen designer is able to create just about anything in the mid to upper-middle range of expectation.

All wood doors are built in-house. The offering includes all the anticipated wood species, a few wide-frame models and a decent selection of edge profiles. The selection of thermofoil doors is extensive both in design and foil colours. Some of AyA's foils will defy you to know whether or not the finish is a lacquer or a laminate. The company has selected a very low sheen top coat (15%) that gives its products a rich, furniture-like finish.

These AyA kitchens are not built as custom kitchens; the keyword here is 'production' but the look is much better than any standardized product I've seen. All cabinets are leg-mounted and off the floor. Optional drawer styles include a wood dovetail box and undermount slides. Standard is the Blum Metabox.

What impressed me most was the spunkiness that the management demonstrates. Here's a group of talented people who are all involved in the thrill of a startup, all of them contributing their very best to make the project work. And it's working. It's also refreshing, in these difficult economic and political times to witness a startup company making it happen, getting their share of a still lucrative market. Indeed, the game has changed.

