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WINED, DINED & DAZZLED

Enhancing the Elite Experience at d|bar

BY KEVIN YOUNG

Typically, when you envision a hotel lounge video setup, the image that comes to mind likely features a smattering of guests vaguely tuned in to one of several large TV screens broadcasting a sporting event or the local news.

Designed and installed by Toronto's Westbury National, the video system at d|bar by Chef Daniel Boulud, an elegant bar and lounge on the ground floor of Four Seasons Hotel and Residences Toronto, is definitely not that.

It's far, far from it, in fact.

d|bar, like the hotel itself, places an emphasis on high-value visual aesthetics and comforts. "They're really making a statement," says John Coniglio, Westbury's account manager for the project, speaking to both the overall atmosphere of the lounge and the state-of-the-art video wall that showcases understated but engaging visuals by local artists and photographers with pristine definition from behind the bar.

"Our goal was to achieve the perfect balance between technology and design, entertainment and art," says Salar Alemi,

director of marketing for Four Seasons Toronto. "The footage we are able to showcase on the video system is both artistic and actual, allowing us flexibility to create ambience with an ever-changing landscape; from the creative application of a local artist, to an awards show, this technology brings a dynamic element into the entire space, offering our guests a truly unique experience."

The end result of their collaboration with Westbury is a 30.24 x 4.5-ft. (9.22 x 1.38-m) LED wall comprised of Christie Velvet Apex Series video tiles – indeed a far cry from your typical bar video system.

"The idea to incorporate video walls came from Shahid Khan, the owner of the hotel," Alemi continues. "As the owner of Fulham FC and the Jacksonville Jaguars, he understands the importance of the fan and guest experience and how that plays into building brand affinity and loyalty. To Mr. Khan, it's all about exceeding everyone's expectations, ours as well. What can we do at d|bar to continually deliver the best possible experience, whether to a regular or first-time visitor? So, to that end, Mr. Khan has taken a significant interest in d|bar."

d|bar

Khan enjoys the occasional evening there himself, after all, and wants to offer the same experience for everyone who makes d|bar part of their day or night, Alemi adds, "So this inspired him to make the accent wall a reality, and the difference it's made at d|bar is understood the moment you arrive."

"The client made that clear to us during the design process, as well as during integration and commissioning," says Jorge Rodriguez, Westbury's lead integrator on the project, about Khan's vision. "In the final stages, we were testing all of the systems, and part of that was the integration into CATV; the World Cup just happened to be on at that moment and it did look phenomenal on that screen."

So, too, does the more artistic content d|bar is focused on providing, Rodriguez continues. "I had no doubts it would, but it has definitely exceeded my expectations."

Increasingly, restaurants and hospitality venues are showing interest in high-end AV systems more often associated with sporting or entertainment venues. "A lot of architects are incorporating some kind of digital element," Coniglio explains, adding that they may be intended as architectural details in themselves – a means of reinforcing a brand's values and a given space's atmosphere or, as in this case, all of the above.

While the impact of sophisticated consumer electronics and AV gear can drive the desire for this type of install, that wasn't the case here. The video wall and d|bar are a reflection of the Four Seasons brand and the surrounding neighbourhood of Yorkville – one of Toronto's premier shopping and dining areas.

"We got involved in September 2017 after being approached by the construction firm for the project," Coniglio explains. "Because this was an existing facility, we had to do a retrofit and they took us on as design partners." From there, Westbury and the constructor's engineering team worked closely to hammer out the details before demoing potential solutions for the client in December 2017.

"Westbury came highly recommended by our general contractor," says Jiri Samal, director of engineering at Four Seasons Toronto. "When we learned they had vast experience in the custom design and building of large-scale AV systems, we knew they were the right partners. Their entire team maintained an excellent level of professionalism during the whole process of design, equipment selection, and throughout the construction phase, where it was important for us to not affect the guest experience. They were easy to work with and very understanding of our internal standards and service procedures."



d|bar

The current Four Seasons complex originally opened in 2012 and is the company's flagship hotel. Being a retrofit, there were several physical elements that impacted Westbury's efforts – for example, existing HVAC systems and the amount of room available for the screen itself.

"They said, 'We need to get the biggest LED screen within this working space.' So I took them through what resolution was available and what the price points were so they could narrow down their choices," Coniglio says.

The solution was determined in a shootout between various manufacturers' products, with Christie coming out on top owing to its balance of image quality and price point.

"I'm a very hands-on kind of person, so I love doing demos because that really helps make the decision easy for clients versus just looking at the numbers," Coniglio adds. "We had to go with a very tight, 1.6 mm pixel pitch because of the short distance between the viewers at the bar and the screen, so a higher resolution was very important. Apex was an almost perfect fit. It couldn't have been a better match – a couple of inches less on each panel and we wouldn't have been able to go as high, or we would have had to look at another product, so that was really satisfying, but was part of the consideration before we started demoing."

Beyond the Christie Velvet Apex surface, the system also includes a Barco E2-JR multi-window processor and a Crestron CP3 3-Series Control System and X-Panel Software running on a rack-mounted Dell PC. "That's the local work computer," Coniglio says, "so if we need to log into the Barco processor or the Christie devices, you slide that out of the rack and have a monitor and keyboard instantly."

One of the primary challenges was finding a location to house the equipment racks. "There is a staircase right behind the wall the screen is mounted on. The closest room, the manager's office, didn't have room, so the only option was an IT room in the basement, quite a distance away. The challenge

was getting cabling from the wall to the equipment room while ensuring we had solid signal and, because all the LED power supplies were to be located in the rack, that they'd work with the distance," Coniglio explains.

"Our designer, Ian Zink, did a lot of homework to determine how that run was going to go," adds Rodriguez, "and ensured we stayed well within the parameters of the Cat-6 cables in terms of the data coming in and out. Once we determined how much power we were going to draw, we created a custom power strip within the rack. We also sent one audio line out, for program sound, to their existing audio infrastructure."

Custom wooden millwork was removed from the wall and then reinstalled where it was needed to run cabling, he continues. "We had to terminate to the proprietary pinings for the Christie brain up top, so there was a lot involved with that, but it was a joint effort with the Christie team and once we had it figured out, we flew right through it."

Video content is driven from three of the six streams available on a Mac Pro, which is rack-mounted using a Sonnet Technologies rack. "The media player divides the content into three streams, which go out to the processor, to the Extron EXDVI Plus MM Fox Box extenders, and to the LED wall," Coniglio says.

Additional technology includes an eight-outlet (2150 VA/1650-watt) Middle Atlantic UPS-2200R to power the racked components and a custom HDMI input from Westbury.

Beyond controlling which content is presented at any given time, the Crestron system allows the client to switch to CATV if necessary. "We also installed a Crestron light sensor to detect light levels," says Rodriguez. "If it's a cloudy or sunny day, the brightness of the screen adjusts accordingly. Also, because the Apex is so bright, we're running it at no more than 20 per cent of its capacity, so it's a powerful beast," Rodriguez says.

Mounting that "beast" required a custom assembly designed by Westbury. "We also worked with the constructor very closely in terms of how the LED wall blends into the space and created a beveled black frame at the bottom to close out a roughly 8- to 12-inch opening between the screen and the back wall," Rodriguez adds. "That's magnetically tacked on, so it will open

easily for servicing."

d|bar is working with a third-party content creator for its visuals, but Coniglio notes that Westbury did help out on that front initially. In order to get something original and unique onto the wall with a quick turnaround, Westbury connected with a group from another project they'd worked on and commissioned a time-lapse video of the city of Toronto from a vantage point on Lake Ontario over the course of 24 hours. "It's shot in 8K, so we can scale down to the 5800 pixels of resolution that we needed," Coniglio shares, adding: "The wall is basically one panel shy of being perfectly 1080."

Going forward, d|bar will acquire content from various sources, including archives of photos shot during TIFF over the years, time lapse videos of various artists' creative processes, and other



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imaging related to the Four Seasons brand and guest experience. The plan is to engage with the local arts community in the development of much of that content.

And again, although the wall wasn't originally intended to show cable programming, should a customer want to watch a specific televised event, the hotel wanted to be able to provide that option.

"The client chose to work with us to develop some preset recalls so they can run their content and create the ambience they want using most of the screen, but then a little window can appear in a specific spot to show whatever a guest would like to watch," Coniglio explains. "Jorge worked with the management at Four Seasons to detail the exact position and size of the window. Ultimately, there is flexibility within the system should Four Seasons wish to change those parameters in the future."

The GUI is programmed to offer very simple operation – an ever-important component of Westbury's turnkey AV solutions. The company also installed a port at the bar in case, for example, the room is used for a PowerPoint presentation with a guest's laptop as a source. "The computer is scaled to provide the proper aspect ratio within the ultra-wide video

wall canvas," Coniglio says. "Currently, d|bar can run three sources simultaneously, but the Barco allows for a total of eight source inputs, so they could have eight windows from eight different sources."

In the end, the system offers flexibility, functionality, elegance, and impact in abundance. "The whole team is pleased," Alemi says in closing. "It has been working well and adds a unique visual element to d|bar, especially for the guests sitting at the bar. The only challenge is keeping up with the demand for content. The possibilities are endless and we are committed to exploring them all."

Although d|bar has a specific usage in mind for the system, the level of versatility and their desire to accommodate their guests' potential needs is, like much of the content they'll create and display, reflective of Four Seasons' core values.

As Isadore 'Issy' Sharp, who founded the brand back in 1960, once said: "There has always been a consistent thread and it propels us forward today ... and that's service."

Kevin Young is a Toronto-based musician and freelance writer.

