

Fun follows function at firm's new digs

By CATHARINE O'DONNELL
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

When Jacques Habra envisioned the conference room of his company's new digs, he didn't think mahogany and plush carpets.

He thought white boards and circuit boards.

Web Elite's new conference table thus became two 8-foot sheets of glass supported by a black metal grid -- what looks like a very big electronic circuit board. It's also wired for laptop computers. The room itself can be divided into two smaller spaces with panels of plastic laminate mounted on wheels -- portable white boards.

At the company's new headquarters on South Fifth Avenue in Ann Arbor, form follows function. But fun is also part of the equation.

The 40-employee Web design and Internet application company headed by 26-year-old Habra moved into the second floor of the former Ann Arbor 1&2 Theater about a month ago. Habra plans to buy the building for an undisclosed amount from developer Ed Shaffran, who bought it last year from theater owner Bob Goodrich. He'd originally planned to turn the building into condominiums, but decided he couldn't make that project pay off.

Instead, Shaffran and Habra, with Grand Rapids architect Michael Corby, executed a sleek, whiz-bang design which includes features like leather lounge seats and a tiny but complete kitchen.

Habra wanted simple, flexible designs for a fast-growing company and its young workforce. He also wanted a building that would make a statement. "Jacques asked me to create a building that would have some substance," said Corby.

That translated to a galvanized steel facade punctuated by a double row of windows -- plenty of natural light but no fancy, tacked-on doodads that quickly passing cars wouldn't notice anyway.

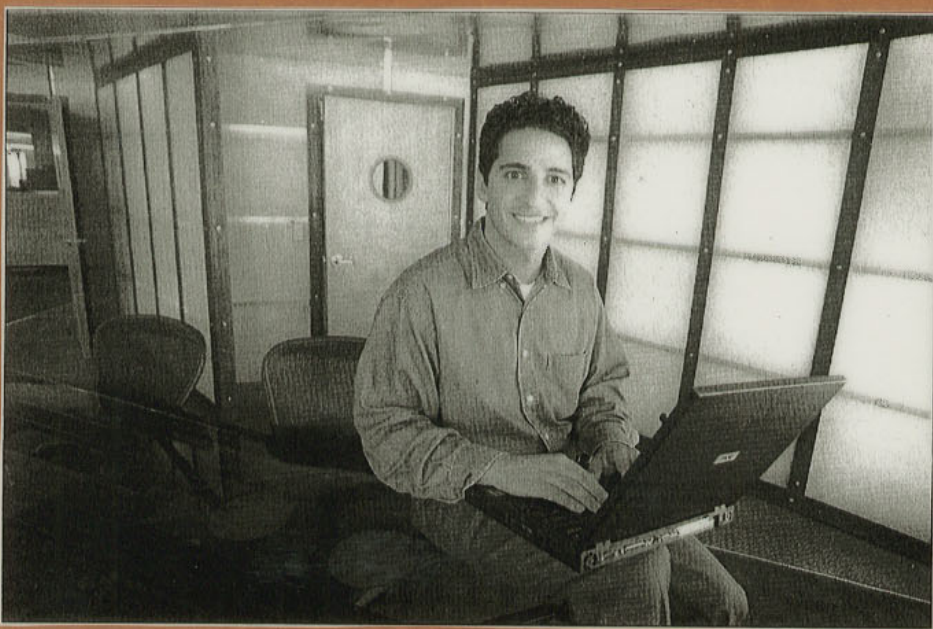
Inside, Habra had four computer servers planted in the front lobby -- highlighting the company's core work. Beyond that are several casual offices, but in the often-egalitarian way of small new high-tech companies, no office has a door. If an occupant wants more privacy, a whiteboard on wheels can be fitted in the opening. Also, each doorway is slanted toward the main work area beyond.

About 12 feet of concrete -- hundreds of gallons -- leveled some of the theater slope. But as the main work area opens beyond the offices, the floor gently slopes and the ceiling seems to rise. Desks and workstations, including at least one with flat-screen, cinema-display terminals, can be pushed around as needed.

For small meetings and a hideaway space in the work area, two big leather couches, with recliners, can be grouped behind white boards on wheels.

For employees who can't take time for lunch, or those who work odd hours, Habra included cooking space.

"This kitchen cost more than my condo," Habra jokes. He points toward



NEWS PHOTOS • ALAN WARREN

Jacques Habra, CEO of Web Elite, sits in the conference room of the company's new headquarters.

WEB ELITE

- **Company name:** Web Elite
- **Top executive:** Jacques Habra
- **Address:** 210 S. Fifth Ave., Ann Arbor
- **1999 sales:** \$1.5 million
- **What they do:** Web site design
- **Web site:** www.webelite.com

brushed steel and aluminum counters, wood cupboards resembling corrugated cardboard and top-of-the-line appliances. Deadline work for customers such as Sun Microsystems and Car & Driver magazine means people in the building all hours of the day and night.

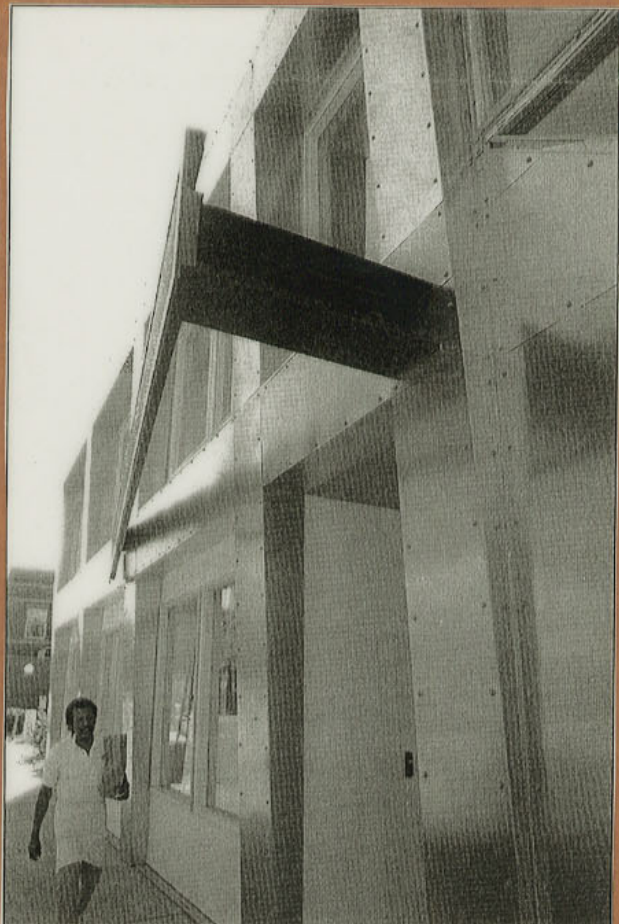
The fact of an old building meant design compromises. A staircase initially planned for the rear of the building had to be moved to the center of the work area to meet building codes. Habra, Corby and Shaffran initially thought about a flagpole between floors but eventually created a set of stairs accented with a curve of corrugated steel.

Detroit Edison rents part of the first floor, but Habra anticipates Web Elite will take the whole building within 18 months. Sales of his five-year-old company will probably exceed \$6 million this year, he predicts -- a 400 percent increase over last. Next year, he expects revenues to hit \$10 million. Web Elite has been profitable since its founding in 1995, but Habra declines to reveal details about the privately held firm's earnings.

Company sales and income affected design in more ways than one. Habra

'Jacques asked me to create a building that would have some substance.'

— architect
Michael Corby



The exterior of the former Ann Arbor Theater now features a galvanized steel facade punctuated by a double row of windows.

and his gang thought the development area would make a terrific basketball court. Eventually, though, work stations won out.

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