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Open-door policy

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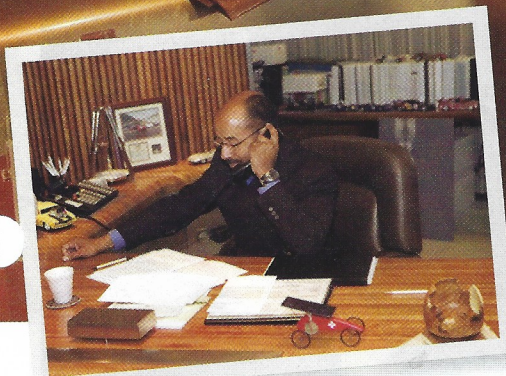


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Dream Space

ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE OFFICES IN THE ENTIRE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY TAKES CENTER STAGE AT GM'S WARREN TECHNICAL CENTER BY GARY WITZENBURG



OFFICE: "This has been the office of every GM Design vice president. The basic layout is unchanged, but each person has brought a different influence to it. All of the furniture has been kept intact, though in some cases it's been reupholstered. The first time I came in here, Bill Mitchell was vice president, and a small group of us was invited up. We were working on a Riviera, a project that wasn't easy, and there were those who didn't agree with what we were doing. He just wanted to thank us for what we were doing. Mitchell was an incredible personality. He could be very tough, but he could also be a lot of help to designers. It was such a big deal that I barely remember much about it ... only that area over there, because that's where we sat, and the scale of it. I don't remember any of this over here. It was just ... wow, amazing!"

DESIGN: "As with all forms of great design, there are several layers ... a first impression that you get from a distance, then more and more as you get closer. The room very much reflects the architectural style of Saarinen ... long and lean,

creative use of materials, and all the glass, which in that time was very significant. It was a period when there was a lot of creative use of materials going on in the auto industry, as well."

PANELING: "It's still dark in the morning when I come in, there's a little bit of light in the room, and all you see is the glow from this paneling. I've never seen any paneling quite like it ... pretty incredible. The sectioning of it is so interesting, and the metal ribs and edges. I think the room looks best in the evenings when it's dark outside, because the lighting on these walls ... the wood just ... *glows* — like honey. It's *unbelievable!* I think a lot about why the walls curve the way they do, but they use the space quite nicely. The bathroom area behind here has a curved wall that mirrors it, and the little coffee area over here takes advantage of it."

DESK: "I also love the surfaces flowing around from the desk

to the doorway, all connected. It's the most fascinating piece of furniture I've ever seen, just *amazing* — and the work that went into it! ... When I look at this desk and its integration into these other counters and into the seating area, it reminds me so much of the master models that Fisher Body used to make. They were done by craftsmen, with a lot of technology involved, and they would've still been making them when this building was done. We did the surface work in clay, then they would make a fender, for example, out of a solid block of wood — this same kind of wood, and this shaping reminds me so much of those. They were laminated like this, the color was like this, and they were absolutely beautiful."



DAVID BADTOL; LEFT INSET: COURTESY OF GENERAL MOTORS



ED WELBURN is the sixth design vice president in General Motors Corp.'s 100-year history. The first was Harley Earl, for whom this spectacular office was designed — along with the rest of GM's sprawling Warren Technical Center — by world-famous architect Eero Saarinen in 1955. It has been called one of the most romantic, luxurious office interiors ever done, with undulating walls and sculpted free-form furniture made of laminated cherry. GM North America President Troy Clarke calls it "the best office in the corporation, no question." Welburn recently sat down with *DBusiness* to discuss his historic office and what it means to him.

VIEW: "I love the view; you can almost get hypnotized by it. What's so great about it is the beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and the colors on the Design Dome (next door). You can watch weather systems come in and move across, and then they're gone."

JETSONS: "This table has hydraulics, and it goes down to cocktail table height. I use it in the high position and in the low position. The TV over there — you hit a button, and it retracts. This desk lamp rotates up and down. You can see the gears down there, and the chain that drives it. The room is full of that kind of *Jetsons* stuff — 1950s technology ... but this was years before *Jetsons*. In some ways, it's crude, but it was very advanced at the time."

DOOR: "You can close the door from here (with a switch right of the chair below the desk, bottom photo). In Earl's or Mitchell's day, people knew that if that door closed behind them, they were in trouble. If you wait until a person gets halfway across the room and hit that button, and the door closes, it makes a different impression. Or if it closes in mid conversation, you know the discussion is about to go to another level."

CHESS SET: "We had an auction here at Design to aid one of our employees, who had a young child who needed extensive medical help. As you know, this building is full of very creative people, and this was created by one of our sculptors. I purchased it partly because I believed in the cause, and also

because I just loved it and thought it would fit in here. He made the wooden board and modeled each chess piece individually, then cast them in bronze."

CHAPARRAL: "One of our designers made

this model out of cardboard at home, and I thought it was so cool I had to have it. It's a Chaparral (a classic 1960s race car) of his own design — his thinking of what a modern Chaparral might look like. I was very inspired by Jim Hall's Chaparrals in my formative years because they were always the most creative and innovative race cars of the time, so I'm a huge Chaparral fan."

GLOBE: "This weathered globe went in when the office was new in 1955. It lights up and has all these mysterious dots on it. No one knows what they're there for. Many have tried to figure out a pattern but haven't been able to. I think they're from Harley Earl, even before Mitchell. But the world has changed so much, and the countries have changed."

BUICK: "This 1913 Buick model from China is the car the emperor used to ride in, and it shows how far back Buick goes in China. It was built here, then the emperor's shop, where they worked on all of his cars, built the custom body. I have something here from every country where we have a design studio, including China, India, Korea, and Australia." **db**

