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From Basement Workshop to Times Square and Beyond – The Hidden Home of BIG Ideas

Toronto, 28-Sep-2004 – Large, impressive feats of technology aren't reserved for multinational companies with huge budgets. The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well, and living – among other places – in New York City's Times Square. The huge matrix of scrolling signs that covers the Toys R Us toy store at Broadway and 44th is a feat of electronics, motor control, and software design, achieved largely by a single person in a home office. (And an enhanced version is currently being installed in downtown Toronto.)

And then there's Ralli, a remarkable racquetball game. Similar to squash but with a lower ceiling, a re-engineered ball, and sophisticated electronics, this high-tech two-player game uses arrays of infrared sensors to monitor the players and ball in real-time. A custom-designed computer generates sounds and controls a multicolor scoreboard on the front wall. It's the closest thing to a Holodeck on planet Earth. And most of the system was developed by one man.

Let's not forget about projects of a smaller scope that are just as intriguing and ingenious. Like electronic golf swing analyzers. Remote car starters. Wireless theatrical dimming. Entertainment special effects.

James David Smith, an electronics and software developer who has worked on fascinating projects across North America, is responsible for all of the above. "The Times Square job is particularly exciting because it goes so far up multiple corporate ladders," muses Smith. "The retailer, the architect, the printer; this thing gets top priority with everyone." And well it should – it's a centerpiece in a mecca of advertising.

Mr. Smith has no employees. Operating as Soundsculpture Incorporated, he doesn't even have a "real" office – though his home is well equipped for work in various disciplines. "I've tried a few different infrastructures over the years," he explains, "but work-at-home is ideal for me. Sometimes it causes what could be called 'credibility issues', but this becomes less of a problem with the kind of portfolio I've built over the years. Besides, there's a whole section at Business Depot for people like me!"

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The hidden Home of BIG Ideas

Disney, Cirque du Soleil, and Magna don't bat an eye about where James works. It's the output that counts, along with service, dependability, timely delivery, and – above all – reasonable cost. "I can make a comfortable living and still charge a reasonable rate. Overhead is low, even with a great shop and great equipment," boasts Smith. "It's about competitiveness, bang for the buck."

What's on JDS' plate right now? "I'm chillin' right now," grins Smith, though somewhat cautiously. Spending time with his three-year-old daughter has become more of a priority, along with pursuing interests in music and photography. "A couple of years ago I had to stop teaching [my University of Toronto course on] firmware development because I just ran out of time. Now I'm getting back into it. I enjoy working with students, they're the future of ideas." He is also pursuing opportunities to write, lecture, and lead technical focus groups.

But there's no doubt James David Smith is pining for a hot new project. "I love crazy, incredible, seemingly impossible stuff. There's nothing more exciting than figuring it out and making it happen. But I don't think up all this stuff on my own. The core creativity comes from the client, and the client owns the end results. Hey – if you run into someone with a fantastic idea that needs electronics, motors, sensors, displays, whatever – tell them about me. I'm ready to get started!"

For more information, visit www.jamesdavidsmith.com, call 1-866-258-4577, or contact:

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James David Smith is a contract electronics design consultant. He has developed award-winning technologies for nearly two decades, including the most memorable effects of Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Phantom of the Opera*, numerous Broadway shows throughout the 1990s, the complex electronics and software behind the *Toys R Us "building board"* in Times Square, and the scrolling matrix of the *Toronto Eaton Centre Media Tower* in Toronto.

Mr. Smith teaches for the University of Toronto [Professional Development Centre](#), Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering, Toronto. His course *Microcontrollers and Embedded Electronic Control* introduces engineers of varying disciplines to electronics, microcontrollers, and firmware-based process control. Mr. Smith's curriculum, and his hands-on practical approach, has been well received by both faculty and students.

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