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Irvine Architect Building on a Sound Design

■ **Construction:** Gary L. Bastien's firm showed Hollywood how to build a stage for less money. Now it has a growing list of foreign clients eager for the same services.

By JESUS SANCHEZ, TIMES STAFF WRITER

When investors from Singapore to Spain contemplate building a movie studio, many of them seek the advice of Gary L. Bastien.

Bastien is neither a powerful Hollywood mogul nor an influential producer. He's an architect from Irvine whose firm showed Hollywood how to build a better sound stage for less money. That paid off with lucrative local commissions in the 1990s and now a growing list of international clients.

"They have more accumulated knowledge than anyone else on how to design modern sound stages," said Stephen Smith, one of the owners of Los Angeles Center Studios, a 10-acre project designed by Bastien & Associates. "They're terrific."

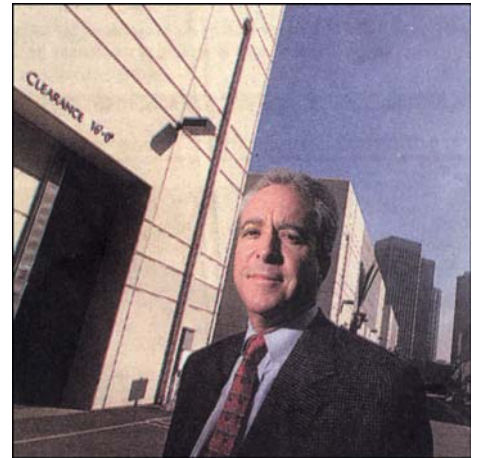
Although Bastien's work is widely praised, there

is some concern that by exporting his know-how to other countries he is undermining Los Angeles' grip on the entertainment business.

The issue is a touchy one in Hollywood, where unions have long opposed the shifting of local production to Canada and other lower-cost locales. The scores of big, modern sound stages in Los Angeles are often what gives it an edge over rival production sites, industry observers say.

The building of modern sound stages abroad "is the biggest threat to L.A.," said Cody Cluff, president of the Entertainment Industry Development Council, which promotes local film production. "It's a big concern and it will affect our competitiveness. All we will have left is our weather."

Bastien, whose Hollywood clients include Warner Bros., Paramount and CBS, said his overseas work poses no threat to the local entertainment industry. In fact, his firm continues to work on many local projects while its international portfolio grows.



Gary L. Bastien, AIA says building sound stages is no threat to the local entertainment industry.

"You are never going to replace Hollywood," Bastien said. "It is still the nerve center of the entertainment industry. It's just that the rest of the world is trying to catch up."

After years of relative obscurity designing suburban office parks and warehouses, Bastien embarked on his Hollywood career in the early 1990s just as the industry was poised for dramatic expansion.

Filmmakers were demanding production facilities larger and more sophisticated than the converted warehouses and antiquated buildings Hollywood had been using since the 1920s, when introduction of the talkies required soundproof stage enclosures. "They basically built a big wooden barn and called it a sound stage," Bastien said. "Amazingly, it hasn't changed that much."

Bastien and his staff set out to learn and master the essentials of building sound stages. In addition to being soundproof, the sound stage must feature expansive column-free space to give designers the flexibility for building huge, detailed sets that can tower several stories high.

The buildings must be wired to handle massive amounts of electrical power and be cooled by powerful yet quiet air conditioners to keep cast, crew and in many cases audiences comfortable under blazing lights.

Increasingly important is easy ac-

cess or a direct connection to dressing rooms and production facilities.

"It's basically a very expensive warehouse," Bastien said as he toured the four-story-tall sound stages at Los Angeles Center Studios.

They may be relatively simple structures, but even one flaw can render them useless for the movie business. In one sound stage facility, Bastien said, the builder made the roof truss out of steel instead of wood, which is preferred for its sound-absorbing quality. As a result, not only did the steel reflect sound but it also made a ping-pong sound as it contracted and expanded in response to temperature changes.

The key to Bastien's popularity in Hollywood was his introduction of a money-saving building technique long used in office and industrial parks: tilt-up construction. Using giant cranes, prefabricated concrete wall panels are lifted into place and joined with other pieces to form exterior building walls. A simple steel and wood truss forms the building roof and ties everything together.

Bastien's Hollywood sound stages are more sophisticated than an Ontario warehouse. But compared with conventional building methods, the tilt-up technique has cut sound stage construction costs in half to about \$125 a square foot, according to Bastien. During the 1990s, the firm, which employs about 25 designers, has worked on the new

sound stages and a master plan for CBS Studio Center in Studio City and the construction of the Manhattan Beach Studios, an \$82-million project and first major studio complex built in Los Angeles in 60 years.

"He found a niche and did a very good job of enhancing his position in that niche," said Smith of Los Angeles Center Studios, which has hired Bastien to plan six more sound stages.

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GARY L. BASTIEN
Architect

Although Bastien remains busy in the Los Angeles area, the firm is now focused primarily on a string of international projects in which private investors and governments are seeking to expand domestic entertainment industries. With a few exceptions, most foreign sound stages and production facilities are too small, inefficient and incapable of accommodating new technology re-

quired to make many feature films.

"They don't have adequate facilities on the whole to handle large-budget features that require large sound stages," Cluff said. "Any country serious about building long-term capability will be looking to develop large, state-of-the-art sound stages."

In the Mexican city of San Miguel de Allende, Bastien is working on a 200-acre project that features a studio with cobblestone streets. In Spain, the company's sound stage and production facility will be the hub of a \$500-million project that includes a film school and hotel.

Owners of a planned 10-acre studio complex in Canada hired Bastien over local architects because they "wanted the Hollywood touch and feel," said Mario Battista, general manager of Brentwood Studios in Vancouver. Bastien, which depends on sound stage design for 75% of its business, also has fielded calls from the Middle East and Malaysia.

"We see a lot of work all around the world," he said.