

01/29/2014

3 Tips for Working in Rising Asia

With high-end projects sprouting up all over China and India, now is a great time to explore the world of international practice. Here are a few tips for a smooth cultural assimilation.

By Robert Nieminen



The St. Regis Hotel in Chengdu, China, designed by DiLeonardo. According to Principal Robert Macaruso, overseas clients are now asking design firms to blend cultural viewpoints with a sense of "Western timelessness." The lobby of the St. Regis uses modern sculpture to capture the city's skyline and leather to add sophistication.

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For the architect or designer working abroad, globalization is more than just a corporate buzzword; it's a palpable concept that produces both opportunities and challenges thanks to the rapid growth of emerging markets in recent years.

"Globalization has become the norm for a lot of design firms like us," said Paul Phillips, AIA, LEED AP, and principal at Karn Charuhas Chapman & Twohey (KCCT). It's no wonder, either, given the pace at which many second- and third-world countries are now developing. The Harvard Business Review predicts that developing markets could account for more than 70 percent of global economic growth over the next few years, with China and India accounting for 40 percent alone.

As more North American firms begin to establish a presence overseas, learning to adapt and develop successful business models is vital. We spoke to a few design firms with extensive experience abroad to determine what to keep in mind—and what to avoid—when working in China and India.

RESET YOUR PACE OF BUSINESS

Respecting the customs and traditions of different cultures while visiting or working in another country is a no-brainer, but as Westerners, we often make the misguided assumption that assimilation will be nearly immediate and that projects will follow similar timetables to those at home.

"American architects fare much better when they take time to absorb and understand local culture and show patience in their international business dealings," said William E. Alisse, AIA, principal at TPG Architecture, London. "Once you secure respect and cooperation from the local design community, you can aspire to the many rewards of working abroad—larger-scale project opportunities, expanded global resources, newfound markets, and the chance to grow and evolve alongside your increasingly multinational client base."

Depending on which country you're working in, the design and construction process can take much longer than one might expect, so be prepared for the long haul. Brad McNamee, AIA, senior vice president at WATG, learned this lesson firsthand while working on a Ritz-Carlton project in Bangalore, India.

"I think for India, in particular, you've got to have patience," he emphasized. "It took almost seven years to get [the hotel] opened from when we started the design work, which is significantly longer than most projects."

In China, on the other hand, the decision-making process is much quicker—perhaps too fast—according to McNamee. "The demands are almost unrealistic in getting things completed," he said. "They're pushing much harder for most of those projects in most cases."

USE DIPLOMACY WHEN IMPOSING STANDARDS

While construction standards are improving in many emerging markets, getting foreign contractors and laborers up to par with North American standards isn't always an easy task, and design practitioners should expect some pushback.

"We're designing to American standards around the world, and we're designing to sustainability standards that are governed here in the U.S., but we're working with foreign contractors and foreign labor," explained Phillips. "So, there's an education process that has to happen between, say, our firm and these foreign companies, to get everything built to [ASTM] standards."

Phillips said they often get pushback from foreign contractors who already have their own material procurement methods in place, which can cause friction when those products don't meet Western standards for quality.

"It becomes this kind of education over a couple of years [where] every single product that you can have in a building has to be analyzed to a very small degree," he explained, "because of the quality difference between what they think are really quality materials and what we think are quality materials."

The good news is that many developing countries are catching up to Western construction standards much more quickly than before—particularly in China, said McNamee.

"I've seen in the last 15 years tremendous improvements in [Chinese] construction quality and delivery. However, I think there's still a lot to be improved," he noted, adding that India is not as advanced as its Chinese counterpart, but quality is improving there as well.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS TO MITIGATE RISK

"From an architectural perspective, there is a real risk involved in joint venturing with a foreign contractor," explained Phillips. In order to mitigate some of those risks, he said KCCT prefers that any foreign contractor they work with enter into a joint venture with an American contractor established in the region in order to afford better legal protections.

"Some contractors overseas, they treat their designers very differently than the U.S. contractors, and how we get treated here in the U.S.," Phillips said, even when it comes to things like receiving payment for services rendered.

"When things go wrong, that's when you really determine how strong your partnership is," he added.

Of course, not all risk is negative. According to Robert Macaruso, principal at DiLeonardo International, both owners and operators overseas seem to be taking more risks with their design projects these days, especially in the hospitality market.

"Everyone continues to ask us to push the limits in the approach towards food and beverage, as well as guestroom design," he said. "A lot of our [international] clients are appreciating the importance of design and service, addressing the necessary cultural touch points, while blending in a sense of Western timelessness."

For Macaruso, the rules of working abroad are actually pretty simple, depending upon the region in which you find yourself: "In the Middle East, listen and deliver. In India, listen harder and deliver. In China, listen harder than you've ever listened and over-deliver."