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WATG opens office here, saying there's 'big stuff coming'

■ *Dennis Rehill says his company's global design experience is needed because there are too many 'blah' buildings going up in Seattle: 'It's just box, box, box.'*

By [LYNN PORTER](#)

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Global architecture firm WATG has reopened an office in Seattle as part of a push to design more high-rise buildings and do master plans in cities.

The firm has temporary space at 500 Yale Ave. N., but will find a permanent location in downtown Seattle in the next few months.

Dennis Rehill, who heads the local office, recently left a job at Gensler in Seattle as the architectural design director for high-rise and commercial office buildings. He is now a vice president at WATG.

WATG is known for high-end resorts and hotels, but wants to do more in-city projects, he said. It also has opened a Chicago office, temporarily at 111 W. Illinois, that is headed by Chris Hurst.

"The trend is people are moving into cities," Rehill said. "(We're) trying to follow that trend."

WATG has more than 340 people on staff, and offices in the U.S. as well as London, Istanbul, Singapore and Dubai. It works on a variety of projects, but specializes in hospitality, leisure and entertainment, with services that include planning, architecture, interior design and landscape architecture. Four Seasons, Marriott and Wynn Resorts are clients, and it has worked on the Four Seasons Resort, Dubai; The Ritz-Carlton, Bali, Sawangan; and the Royal Opera House in Muscat, Oman.

WATG's Seattle staff will focus on urban design and office, housing and hospitality projects — from urban infill to high-rise — both here and abroad. It will start with five to 10 people, and hire more based on demand, Rehill said.

The office is pursuing projects in China, Africa and North America, as well as in Seattle, which Rehill said is "one of the prime places we want to be working. There's so much work here in Seattle right now."

He said Chinese investors are looking outside China for projects. They are going into Seattle and San Francisco, for instance, and hoping to find opportunities in Africa.

The Seattle office will collaborate with staff in other WATG offices, including Nic Jacobs, head of the firm's office and urban design studio in London.

Rehill said WATG's hospitality background means it brings a higher level of design to high-rises. "An apartment building can be a pretty plain vanilla thing," he said, "or it can be like a Four Seasons."

People are moving to the Seattle area for tech jobs, he said, and they want to live in high-end apartments: "That's what we're seeing."

Rehill said he expects NBBJ, ZGF Architects and Weber Thompson will be among his competitors locally.



Rehill

Rehill's expertise is designing and master planning large, complex buildings as well as urban districts and cities in the Middle East, Asia, North America, United Kingdom and Ireland.

Among the projects he has worked on are Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill's mixed-use projects and master plans, including Goldenland Suzhou, a nearly 1,000-foot-tall office/hotel tower and a 900-foot-tall residential tower in Suzhou, China.

Rehill worked at Scott Tallon Walker Architects in Dublin, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in Chicago and London. He was on design teams for Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the world's tallest skyscraper, and Kingdom Tower in Saudi Arabia, now under construction and aiming to be taller than Burj Khalifa.

He said he has talked to two developers who want to build 1,000-foot towers in Seattle. "It's all early days and land deals are being done so it's all confidential, but there's big stuff coming on the horizon in Seattle," said Rehill.

The 20-year veteran architect said he's concerned Seattle's skyline is getting high-rises that "are just plain and very blah" and "the skyline is blah as well."

"It's just box, box, box; and they're all cut off at the zoning height. There's no variation in the heights," he said. "Nobody is looking at the big picture."

You could place any Seattle tower anywhere in the world and not be able to say it's Seattle architecture, Rehill said. "Architecture should be talking about the place that (it) resides rather than being universal."

With Seattle's rapid growth, "it's very easy to rush and build things that aren't really interesting," he said. "It's easy to do copy and paste."

The result is that the skyline turns into "a primitive replica of the zoning diagram" for downtown, he said. That diagram calls for buildings to get shorter as they move away from the center, in the manner of a wedding cake.

Rehill said developers can get the allowed area but still have some design variety by tapering or shaping buildings, or by varying the heights in two-tower projects.

Some developers in Seattle want to buck the trend of blah buildings, he said. They are concerned about quality, because they plan to own property long term. "These people are really looking to do something different," he said. "They're not happy with status quo."

Rehill is the city representative for the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat's Seattle chapter. He said he would like the chapter to work with the city to start conversations about what people want Seattle's skyline to be.

Rehill said Chicago's high-rise market is just picking up again. WATG is hiring talented architects there, he said, expecting high-rise work to get going in the next year or so.

The 70-year-old firm is a big player internationally and an adviser to developers of large projects, he said. It has increasingly been asked to enter design competitions, but has not had the in-house expertise to get the work.

In 2000, WATG opened an office in Seattle, from which it mostly serviced international projects, Rehill said. The office closed in 2012 and some staff moved to Singapore as part of WATG's expansion in Asia.

Rehill said he is excited to be heading the Seattle practice.

"I am really looking forward to it," he said. "In a lot of ways it's like starting your own firm from scratch" — but with an established company behind you.

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