

A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY

Catalyzed by the Great Recession, American architecture is going global—and global architecture is going green. Here's what US firms need to know before they export their sustainable designs.

STORY
MATT ALDERTON

ALTHOUGH IT'S JUST 150 MILES NORTH OF THE US border with Mexico, the city of San Antonio isn't exactly teeming with international activity. For example, whereas Chicago's O'Hare International Airport serves at least 45 international destinations, San Antonio International Airport serves just one.

So there's no question: for a global architecture firm, San Antonio is an unlikely home base. And yet it's been mission control for Overland Partners for more than 23 years. A 60-person architecture firm that's worked on design projects in 30 states and half a dozen countries, it's but one of many American firms specializing in sustainable architecture that have expanded beyond US borders during the Great Recession.

"When the partners started the firm, they selected San Antonio because it's a great place to raise a family, not because it's the international center of all architectural commissions," says principal Bob



Shemwell, FAIA, LEED AP. “There’s a fairly small pool of work in our immediate area, so we’ve always had to travel to access the clients and projects that value what we do.” These days, the principals at Overland Partners are traveling farther and more often.

“If we had a specific goal in mind for how we’d like to do work, it might be 40–50 percent in Texas, 30–40 percent across the United States, and 10–15 percent internationally,” says Tim Blonkvist, FAIA, LEED AP, a founding principal at Overland Partners. “What we’ve discovered, though, is that there’s much less work across the United States because of the down economy. So, we’ve had to shift a higher percentage of our work—30–35 percent—internationally.” It’s a conundrum common to architecture firms nationwide, many of which have similarly shifted their priorities overseas during the downturn, often deploying resources—both people and capital—to strategic international markets. “This is not a good time for

architects in the United States,” says Ken Kornberg, AIA, founding principal and president of Kornberg Associates, a 15-person firm with two offices in California and one in Tokyo. “There simply isn’t enough work for us locally. Without the work we’re doing abroad, we wouldn’t be able to keep our staff.”

The problem is even more salient among larger, more established firms—including Chicago-based Perkins+Will, which was founded in 1935 and now has approximately 1,500 employees in 23 offices worldwide, including Dubai, London, and Shanghai. “Because the economy has tanked, it’s become pivotally important that big firms be involved in international projects,” says managing director Raymond Clark, AIA, LEED AP. “For big firms to survive and remain financially viable, they’ve got to go where the work is. It’s that simple. And right now, the work isn’t in the United States—it’s in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe.” >>



Okinawa Institute of Science & Technology
ONNA, OKINAWA, JAPAN
KORNBERG ASSOCIATES



Cameron
PLOIESTI, ROMANIA
EPSTEIN



Rondo ONZ High-Rise Office Building
WARSAW, POLAND
EPSTEIN
Photo: Włodzimierz Echenski

INTERNATIONAL INTRIGUE

In good times and bad, diversity is critical, according to Michael Damore, AIA, managing director and president of architecture and interior design at Epstein, a Chicago-based firm of approximately 200 people with international offices in Poland and Romania. His firm's been working internationally since 1969, and the main benefit has been its balanced portfolio. "Being completely broad in terms of market and services sort of smoothes out the hills and valleys a bit," Damore says.

More than helping firms survive, international projects enable firms to do the types of work they want to do. "We're working in Central Europe right now because that's where economies are still growing," Damore says. "We're doing a high-rise condo project right now in Warsaw. It's phenomenal. We're also doing office buildings. You know who's designing offices right now in the United States? Nobody."

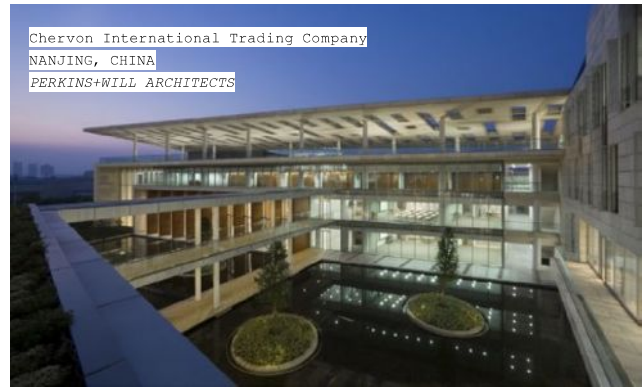
Although it's been working internationally since 1990, Kornberg Associates opened its first overseas office in Tokyo in 2004 when it was hired to design a new research institute and graduate university campus in Japan as part of an effort by the government to diversify the Okinawa economy. Because the firm specializes in designing laboratories and research facilities, it was an exciting opportunity to help build an industry from scratch by lending its expertise to a country that wanted

American input. "Our office is now the only lab-design firm in Japan," Kornberg says. "There is going to be a lot more research development going on there now, so it's a good position for us to have."

Marc Spector, AIA, NCARB, a principal of New York-based Spector Group, echoes the sentiment that international work is attractive—not only because it's lucrative, but also because it's exciting. His firm opened its first international office in Abu Dhabi in 2009, followed by its second, in Mumbai, in 2010. "It's a calculated risk to go into these markets," Spector says. "It's a chance to bring our expertise and knowledge to other parts of the world. We want to make money, sure, but we also want to have fun while we do it."

OVERSEAS OBSTACLES

For every benefit, there is a risk. In the case of international work, the challenges are numerous, and each requires face-to-face solutions in the form of overseas offices, foreign-born employees, and local partners. "It's self-evident," Clark says, "but you have to understand the transactional customs or statutory requirements of different countries and international markets, and you have to understand their tax structure. You have to be aware of professional licensing issues because in some areas of the world you can't practice unless you're registered, which might heavily influence your whole approach to



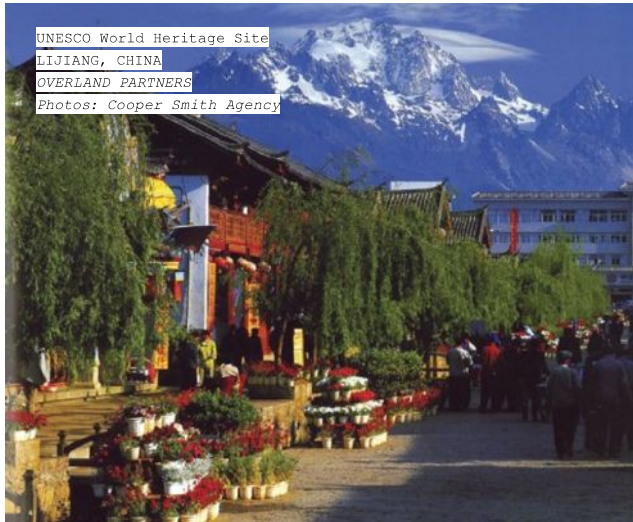
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—Raymond Clark, Managing Director,
Perkins+Will

assembling a project team. The cultural and communications issues are obvious too and need to be dealt with carefully.”

Even with modern technology, the easiest and most effective way to overcome international challenges is addressing them in person. “We feel strongly that you need design professionals on the ground, in the region, who are capable of making project-related decisions,” Clark says. “Clients are simply more comfortable when they can sit down in a conference room and work hand-in-hand with their consultants.” Because it wants to keep its overhead low, Overland Partners takes a different approach. Although its partners travel regularly to meet face-to-face with international clients, the firm prefers to hire international talent rather than open international offices.

“We’re working in China now, and what we’ve done is hired people in our San Antonio office who are from China and who speak English,” Blomkvist says, who, at any one time is collaborating with employees from six to 10 different countries. “They can help us with translation—anything we write is written side-by-side in both English and Chinese—which helps us communicate more directly.” Even when overseas offices aren’t necessary, however, overseas representation is. “They work so fast [abroad] that even if you go over there every month or two, it’s too late to ask them to correct a problem if you find one,” Blomkvist adds. “You really need to have somebody there locally to be your eyes and ears so that you can correct problems quickly when they arise.” >>



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—Bob Shemwell, Principal,
Overland Partners

SENSITIVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

With or without a local office, the biggest challenges facing US firms in foreign countries aren't economic—they're cultural. When he began working in France, for instance, Kornberg had to adapt to the limited role of architects in Europe, who typically exit their projects after the design phase. Similarly, he had to learn to do without American-style contracts when he began working in Japan, where business customs are based on honor instead of litigation. "You have to understand what's politically correct, what's going to be embarrassing, and how to make sure your relationships with people are what they expect them to be," Kornberg says.

Cultural challenges are equally present in the design process. In April 2010, Overland Partners began working on a master plan for the redevelopment of a 320-acre UNESCO World Heritage site in Lijiang, one of China's oldest cities. Although talented and eco-minded Chinese architects abound, Shemwell says that many of the country's architectural practices are not focused on the country's architectural heritage.

"Architects in China seem much more interested in the new rather than the old," he explains. "Most of the ones we have encountered are working in very modern styles that are inspired by Europe and America. Many of the new 'Chinese-style' buildings we have seen do not exhibit a deep understanding of the Chinese architectural vernacular and what the tradition has to offer."



Overland Partners secured the six million-square-foot project because it did understand—and was sensitive to—that tradition. Located just minutes from ancient Lijiang, the site will include a five-star hotel and conference center, an artist's village, a river walk like San Antonio's, a thermal spa, a wildflower research center, and 100 housing units—much of which will be built using the traditional framing techniques of Lijiang's native Naxi people. "This area has the most indigenous people of anywhere in China," Shemwell says. "We're taking what's really intelligent and wonderful about their designs and using it to continue a craft tradition. They wanted people to study their ancient history and culture and come up with a way to make their facilities modern, and that's what we did."

One thing that isn't challenging abroad is green design. With 5,992 LEED-certified buildings in more than 90 countries, a focused effort on sustainable building is well underway worldwide. To make Lijiang's master plan as environmentally sustainable as it is culturally sensitive, Overland Partners took advantage of the site's natural features—including a lake and a network of rivers—to enhance native-plant landscapes as well as eco-friendly irrigation and storm-water management. The firm also incorporated Styrofoam block insulation, increasing buildings' thermal efficiency; passive cooling systems, eliminating the need for air conditioning; and hydrothermal technology, naturally heating residents' water. "At home and abroad," Blomkvist says, "our work is very much about the preservation and integration of nature—in our buildings, on our buildings, and around our buildings." >>

STUDYING ABROAD

ONE FIRM'S FORAY ONTO THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

According to education publisher Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), 50 of the world's top 100 universities are in the United States or United Kingdom. Fifteen are in Asia, and none are in the Middle East.

The Arabic emirate of Qatar wants to change that. To help it do so, the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development created Education City, a consortium of global universities—six from the United States, one from the UK, and one locally from Qatar—that have agreed to collaboratively operate program-specific satellite campuses in Doha, the capital city.

Education City now enrolls 1,300 students from 26 world nations on its 2,500-acre campus. To house all of them, it decided in 2007 to commission a new 850,000-square-foot student housing project. And it selected an American firm to design it: Treanor Architects of Lawrence, Kansas.

Although Treanor Architects had never done work outside the United States, it had planned, programmed, or designed more than 150 student-life projects across the nation. Based on that experience, Burns & McDonnell Engineering of Kansas City, Missouri, asked the company to be its design partner in pursuit of the project. Together, the two firms entered the design competition in February 2007. They were notified in early March that they'd been short-listed with two other firms, at which point they had six weeks to complete their proposed design. They submitted their plans in May, then flew to Qatar for a series of face-to-face interviews. In August, they received word that they'd been awarded the project, design of which commenced in September and concluded the following June, with construction scheduled for completion in 2011.

Because her team was unaccustomed to the challenges of international work, the project was intense, recalls Nadia Zhiri, AIA, LEED AP, principal in charge of Treanor Architects's Student Life studio. The most difficult aspects were the travel schedule, the use of British standards, and the metric sys-



ABOVE, BELOW: Renderings of the women's housing site at Education City in Qatar.



tem, challenges she and her team solved with frequent overseas visits and regular counsel from her project partners at Burns & McDonnell, which fortunately operates an office in Qatar.

The project was worth the hard work. The complex—12 structures providing space for 1,200 students—will be the world's largest collection of LEED Platinum buildings, thanks to its plethora of green-design features, which include fiber-optic lighting, renewable and recycled materials, rain screens on the buildings' exteriors, photovoltaic cells and wind turbines, and a greywater-filtration system.

"We have an acute interest in making sure students feel really good so they can be successful, and LEED design actually helps facilitate that," Zhiri

says, adding that the design is not only environmentally friendly, but also culturally sensitive, incorporating a prayer room and continual reminders of the direction of Mecca. "We've done a lot to be sensitive to the region we're in. We're not trying to transport our culture there. We're taking the best of both worlds and bringing them together."

Treanor Architects's first overseas project was a whirlwind, but it cleared the way for future work. "This project has definitely opened doors for us," Zhiri says, adding that the firm is working on its second international project in Belize. "It's helped us secure new business, but it's also enriched our lives and increased our understanding of another culture. It's made us better designers and better citizens."

World Jewel Capital
RIYADH KINGDOM, SAUDI ARABIA
SPECTOR GROUP

"Our offices in Abu Dhabi and Mumbai were both proactive. We had no work in either location when we opened. We settled on Abu Dhabi because you have to go where the money is...and Mumbai because there really is no statement of architecture there yet; we think it's going to be the next explosive campground for business."

—Marc Spector, Principal, Spector Group





GOING GLOBAL

US firms that want to pursue international work have several options. One is slow but deliberate growth, a strategy embraced by Perkins+Will, Kornberg Associates, and Overland Partners, each of which began working internationally gradually as overseas clients noticed their work. When they have them, international offices have been mostly project-specific, opened for a single client and grown from there. “Ours was a very classical evolution from a local firm in 1935 to a much more regional firm, as we expanded in the Midwest and Eastern regions, to a national firm, as we started opening offices in other cities and regions,” Clark says of Perkins+Will. “About 20 years ago, we started tapping into special projects overseas. Then, in about 1995, we made a very strong and very deliberate transition from a North American firm doing international work to being a truly global firm.”

Another option is aggressive, strategic growth, says Spector, whose firm opened international offices not to service existing projects, but rather to pursue new ones. “Our offices in Abu Dhabi and Mumbai were both proactive,” he says. “We had no work in either location when we opened. We settled on Abu Dhabi because you have to go where the money is—while Dubai’s is projected to run out in 10 to 15 years, Abu Dhabi has oil in perpetuity—and Mumbai because there really is no statement of architecture there yet; we think it’s going to be the next explosive campground for business.”

Regardless of growth strategy, international projects require tremendous support. Damore says Epstein has closed several international offices over the years—in Paris, London, and Tokyo, for instance—due to a lack of resources. “If you want to expand in overseas markets, it takes money to do so,” he says, cautioning that global firms must have sufficient capital and key leadership to support foreign operations, as well as the willingness to abandon markets when demand dries up or key personnel move on.

“You have to be willing to spend money inwardly, and to lose that money if it doesn’t come to fruition,” Spector adds. “You have to pick the market that suits your growth model. You can do far greater business in London and France and Greece than in Mumbai, but the potential is far greater in countries that are in the infancy of growth.” Along with deep pockets, expanding firms need dependable relationships. Spector advises firms to identify players with whom they’ve done business in other parts of the world.

Ultimately, though, there is no one route to global operation. Firms that want to work on foreign soil must be willing to learn new languages, trade in new currencies, and adapt to new customs. Those are the only certainties, however. As with architecture, the rest must be figured out in the course of building. “Whenever you go into a new market, there will be surprises,” Clark says. “You should always expect the unexpected.” **gb&d**