Imagine challenging someone to a pick-up game of basketball. Outerwear is shed, sneakers are laced up, and you hit the court...only to find that your mild-mannered opponent actually has a jet pack grafted to his middle. You feel humbled, awed, and inspired by the scoring spectacle in equal turns.

The Interior Design profession may have witnessed an equivalent outmatching with the International Interior Design Association’s first-ever Global Excellence Awards. The new competition elicited 300 submissions of works executed outside of the United States. Witnessing the inaugural jurors—widely known designers Giorgio Borruso and Dan Menchions, BMW Group DesignworksUSA creative director Patrick McEneny, and Ben Watson, executive creative director of Herman Miller—review and discuss the entries, IIDA’s executive vice president and CEO Cheryl Durst says she developed the impression that these projects also were rocket-fueled. That, overseas, interior designers could make the seemingly impossible possible.

The observation began solidifying with Belfry Tashkent, Durst recalls. This jewelry store in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, designed by the Stuttgart firm Ippolito Fleitz Group, is as intricate as any of the baubles for sale. Stainless-steel panels, laser-cut in an evocatively Arabic geometric pattern, are installed in front of dark walls. Light from ogive-arch windows shines through this deep surface to amplify the Moorish sensibility, while an undulating lighting element suspended from the ceiling provides a more contemporary accent. “It was interesting watching the judges encounter this project, which in the States could be considered over the top. For some it was nothing but bling, but in Tashkent it was precisely what a jewelry store should be.”

The group pored over other submissions. With Middle Eastern interiors, for example, “Layers and layers of stuff equates to good design,” Durst says. “That’s absolutely where we’re not headed in North America. Coming out of a recession, many clients don’t want that luxe-glam feel.”

AS THE WORLD TURNS

Analyzing the IIDA Global Excellence Awards
By David Sokol

Project: Belfry Tashkent
Location: Tashkent, Uzbekistan
Firm: Ippolito Fleitz Group, Stuttgart, Germany
Category: Retail
Award: Best of Category

Photographer: Zooey Braun
There is a longstanding stereotype that European interiors commissions push the creative envelope and that the progressive strategies from those jobs trickle down into the American design vocabulary. Yet the IIDA competition’s snapshot of the global marketplace complicates the myth and proposes a much more multifarious network of cause and effect. To be sure, another Global Excellence Award-winning project by Ippolito Fleitz, the Munich-based dental surgery office Weissraum, reinforces the common perception of Europe as the proving ground of ideas. On the other hand, a surfeit of honorees from East Asia suggests that that part of the world is taking over as a design laboratory. And a glimpse of all these projects raises very practical questions about whether an American has to espouse completely different attitudes and approaches to design in order to win business in Uzbekistan or Hong Kong.

**SCRUTINIZING THE SUBMISSIONS**

Arguably, apportioning American design and international design as separate spheres with unique trends is a false dichotomy. “Access to the world is so easy through the Internet and global media, says juror Menchions, that design influence travels in all directions.” He points to Mission & Associates’ Heliport VIP Lounge in Hong Kong, which earned the “Best of Competition” title, as an exemplary project to this end. Mission & Associates riffed on an angular building envelope to create winding circulation and to define spaces via hexagonal forms. Such physical constraints are to be expected anywhere, and a similarly ingenious response to those limitations would be equally at home in Las Vegas.

The Toronto-based designer also believes that North American designers conceiving and executing interiors in other countries are chosen to do so based on their track records. “There are leaders in the industry whose work is inspirational everywhere,” he says, “People will hire Keith [Rushbrook, Menchions’ partner at II BY IV Design Associates] and me based on what we do and what they think we can achieve for them.” These talents are being commissioned for their signature abilities and styles, so pushing too far outside a comfort zone is not the point.

Julio Braga is design principal of Interior Architects’ New York office and lead designer on the Bancolombia headquarters in Medellín, Colombia, which won a Global Excellence Award for Large Corporate Space. He concurs that overseas clients select designers for what they bring to the table already, not to attempt self-reinvention for the sake of a new place. “They are looking for a certain type of expertise, for which they assume they’ll pay substantial fees.”

Type of interior also may factor into the domestic-international bifurcation. Whereas retail spaces very visibly espouse different attitudes across borders, Durst notes, “I’m inclined to say that an attorney’s office in Chicago may not be markedly different from one in Prague.” In addition to retail, the global marketplace feels significantly aesthetically fragmented regarding healthcare. A Weissraum—although clearly a slam dunk to

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design practitioners everywhere—seems too progressive for an American client to embrace. But does that reflect an overarching attitude toward preventive medicine, the American insurance companies that underlie health and well-being, or the mindsets and capabilities of doctors and the talents they hire?

Whether a medical office–cum-spa or the hypothetically universal lawyer’s space, every setting comes with its own vicissitudes. Due to access to fabrication resources, Belfry Tashekent’s lace-like walls had to ship to Uzbekistan from Germany. Because suppliers and import taxes vary, “in some cases you end up defining the design intent instead of calling for particular products,” Braga says, “I FedEx physical samples so suppliers are able to understand the material and try to find something that is comparable.”

Then there are the users who, Internet and global media notwithstanding, represent cultures as specific as their sites. Braga says the BanColombia project is “a little more colorful in every way, because the personality of the people is a little more colorful.” Extroversion also recommended more social space than one would find among American financial workers who still largely prefer their cubicles. And it manifested in the facility’s art program, which required tailored designs and business strategies, as well as on-the-ground partners.

However nuanced, the world of interiors seemingly demands site-specific accommodation. Indeed, W Hotels also attended Vander Schuur’s event, and Starwood revealed that color was one effective strategy for accommodating local culture: although it would be too expensive to substantively change a product with expensive tooling costs, such as a mobile device or car, rethinking color to range from subdued to spicy can please many consumers at once.

Last year Kurt Vander Schuur, Industry IIDA, corporate brand director of the Holland, Michigan–based manufacturer Haworth, organized a symposium at which companies discussed their strategies for creating and selling design in globalization conditions. Vander Schuur recalls that color was one effective strategy for accommodating local culture: although it would be too expensive to substantively change a product with expensive tooling costs, such as a mobile device or car, rethinking color to range from subdued to spicy can please many consumers at once.

"The China Exception"

Designing a large office or hotel in Eastern Europe or South America may differ in degree from taking on the same charge stateside, if not in kind. Whereas that kind of cross-border commission may demand the sensitivity that is a first principle of any good design practice, subtlety flies out the window in China.

In 1998 Los Angeles architects Mark Rothenberg and Mitch Sawasy, FIIDA, FAIA, gathered their fellow principals and associates at RSA to contemplate reinvention. “We got extremely good at doing the same thing over and over again,” Rothenberg says of the firm’s interior architecture work there. There was a nascent interest in pursuing architecture and urban planning jobs, and the colleagues were particularly attracted to relevant opportunities in China.

“They were very large-scale and complicated, integrated mixed-use projects and high-rise projects.” Not long after, the partners acquired the studio of a friend with significant business in China. Currently six employees work in RSA’s Beijing office, with another 25 staff based at the American headquarters.

Certainly much has changed in the last 10 years, such as the number of English speakers, Sawasy says. Even so, working in China is the 21st-century design equivalent of wild-west pioneering. Rothenberg notes, “Real estate on the scale of China’s experience has not been around very long. The whole capitalist environment hasn’t been around very long. So clients are learning about relationships between different project types and even within a singular project type—how things should function, economic performance, market studies, things we take for granted.”

Economic realities are largely lost on Chinese developers, because size, programming, and open-space and parking requirements are dictated by the government. Functional nuances are a low priority, too, because developers have almost uniformly hewn to a speculative business model. Noting there’s greater emphasis on a property’s immediate saleability and image versus its long-term durability when it comes to flipping, Sawasy says, “So clients are very bold in accepting very progressive design of interiors and architecture. The challenge is they don’t always understand how that building is organized or operated. It’s a great-looking building, though.”
The lack of comprehension extends to native designers themselves. "This is a culture that copies and pastes," says Lori Maas, who worked in China as a design director for Gensler and has since returned to New York to oversee projects for Interior Architects. "My staff was all between the ages of 23 and 27, and they had never seen a program before. Whereas in Europe and America we’re so aware of variables, they were so excited about everything. So they had to see, through my eyes, how to build things."

Maas thinks the situation is not permanent. "Have you looked at solar energy or cars? You can’t just buy IA or Gensler, but the age in which the Chinese don’t need our expertise anymore is coming quickly."

In the meantime, North American designers still enjoy the opportunity to produce work that truly is impossible—although, simultaneously, designers here must treat the visual spectacles coming to fruition in and around the Chinese market as not exactly tenable elsewhere. Seizing the opportunity requires a thorough understanding of context that clients and local associates themselves may lack, as well as practicable language, pricing (Chinese contracts are negotiated only once), and other skills. The most important tool may be a jet-pack attitude, because, as Rothenberg says, "When you’re over there, every day is an intoxicating adventure."