MEETING THE NEEDS OF TODAY’S DIVERSE COMMUNITIES REQUIRES A SHARP EYE FOR CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING. BY JANET LIAO
When designing the Beijing corporate office for Gold Sands, a Guangzhou-based mining company, Sawasy, Principal at Los Angeles-based Rothenberg Sawasy Architects (RSA) and IIDA President-Elect, found the client’s spiritual connections had an important influence — but not before hitting a few bumps.

Using Western concepts, the team designed the chairman’s office to be situated in the corner of the building — considered a place of honor in Western culture — with windows facing south and west. The chairman’s executive management team was to be located adjacent to him, with the administrative assistant directly outside their doors. “After all, they had hired us because of our Western designs,” Sawasy says.

But after a client review, Gold Sands’ chairman indicated that the design had “incorrectly” located the offices and furniture. According to the client’s feng shui master, the design went against basic principles of the traditional Chinese practice. Sawasy had to rethink the design based on the culture of those who would be using the space.

“Today’s designer needs to be an urban anthropologist capable of understanding the big and little nuances of the cultural divergences that impact the businesses of today and tomorrow,” he says.

Organizations and institutions are becoming multinational, employing, serving and educating people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. As shared spaces — offices, hospitals and schools — become cultural melting pots, architects and designers are charged with working more closely with clients to harness the cultural environment of those using the space.

“Since so many of our design ventures now have global components, it’s essential that spaces speak well to different audiences and that they do not inadvertently offend any of them,” says Kathryn Anthony, Ph.D., Professor, the School of Architecture, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

From the outset of the design process, designers must be sensitive to how diverse users will respond to their work, says Anthony, author of Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Architectural Profession. While designers are trained in the arts, among other areas, “one can look at a piece of artwork or sculpture and walk away if they don’t like it,” she says. “Compared to artists, designers have a much greater responsibility to the public.”

The workplace today has shifted from one where employees adapted to fit into an existing environment. Corporations are becoming more open-minded and flexible in order to impact recruiting and retention and gain a competitive edge, says James Williams, AIA, LEED AP, National Director of Design for Little Diversified Architectural Consulting, Charlotte, N.C. And that’s true for all environments — hospitals, schools and hospitality spaces — as markets become more competitive.

“Design needs to create a sense of belonging for the
“We’re asking a lot more questions and getting a lot more answers informing the designs that respond directly to the clients’ goals and objectives. We’re not finding ourselves in the middle of a project looking for answers.”

Visioning charrettes – problem-solving design workshops – helps Sawasy’s team at RSA better understand how to weave cultural ideology into projects. “The way we like to understand the population of a specific company is to spend time with them, not just in the boardroom but also in staff meetings and lunch breaks,” he says. “We listen more than we talk. We record visual observations of workflow, staff interaction, interoffice communication, recreational events and company spirit to understand who they are.”

But even with extensive research, it may take several rounds of changes before cultural elements are properly translated into the design, as Sawasy found with Gold Sands.

In the end, he revised the plan, moving the chairman’s office to the south side of the building and switching the placement of management, with the lowest-ranking manager in the corner. Administration was redirected to an enclosed room across the hall, so a supervisor could more easily observe the staff. “As the plan continued to evolve, it became very clear that spiritual harmony was more important than efficiency and aesthetics,” Sawasy says.

Communicating with the client to stay up-to-date about any cultural inconsistencies was crucial, even if it meant working at a different pace than the team is used to. “I found that Chinese clients want to work 24/7,” Sawasy says. For the Gold Sands...
Symbols and colors can lead to a culture clash when they’re tied to a group’s history, politics and religion. They can often evoke deeper — and sometimes negative — connotations than were intended. “It is particularly important for designers, as they work globally, to be aware of cultural perception,” says Joy Malnar, AIA, Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

**COLORS**

- **Black** is chic and classic for many people, but in some Western cultures, black has a negative association with death and evil — dating back to the Black Plague of the 14th century.

- **White** is symbolic of death in many Asian cultures. “Even within the U.S., many hospitals were considered death houses as late as the 1960s,” says DAK Kopec, Ph.D., AIA, IDEC, Professor of Design at the Newschool of Architecture and Design, San Diego.

- **Red** is considered good luck in Asian cultures, but is associated with evil in Judeo-Christian religions. “Oftentimes, the color red gets us into trouble,” Kopec says.

- **Yellow** symbolizes imperial power in China, but stands for timidity and deceit in Northern Europe.

**SYMBOLS**

- **A fat belly** represents wealth and good fortune in China, but symbolizes gluttony in Western culture.

- **The swastika** is a sacred symbol in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, and occurs in Asian, European, African and Native American cultures as a lucky symbol. But since its adoption by the Nazi Party in the 1920s, it has been associated with fascism, racism and the Holocaust. In the late ’60s, attention was brought to the Naval Amphibious Base Coronado in San Diego, when an oversight by Navy planners, who built the six-building complex, resulted in an inadvertent swastika-shaped formation, as seen from the air.

**NUMBERS**

- **Four** in Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese and Korean cultures is considered an unlucky number because it sounds like the word “death.” Many East Asian buildings, especially hospitals, skip the fourth floor. **Fourteen** is considered one of the unluckiest numbers, since it sounds like “yao si,” which sounds like “want to die” in several Asian languages.

- **Six** in Western cultures is considered an unlucky and demonic omen, especially when it appears in a string, 666. However, the Chinese believe 666 to be one of the luckiest numbers, because it sounds similar to the word “liu,” which means smooth and flowing.
AS WE BECOME ONE ECONOMY ... WE MUST RESPECT AND UNDERSTAND WHO WE ARE DESIGNING THE PROJECTS FOR.

—Mitchell E. Sawasy, FIDA, AIA, Principal, Rothenberg Sawasy Architects, IDA President-Elect