DESIGN WITHOUT BORDERS

Theresa Dowling invited leading architects and designers from across the contract sector to come together to discuss the realities of working globally – from cultural nuance and identity to planning barriers, ethics, and the continually shifting balance between UK and overseas markets...

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Designing internationally has never been more complex – or more compelling. As global markets fluctuate and clients cast their nets wider, UK design and architecture practices continue to find strong demand abroad, buoyed by a strong design heritage, creative bravery, and deep research culture. Yet this appetite for British design sits alongside a far more challenging landscape: shifting global investment hotspots abroad, and the ethical dilemmas that come with working in countries whose values may diverge sharply from those of the designers they commission. It is against this backdrop that we brought together leading voices from architecture and interiors from office, hotel, retail, and civic sectors to ask what it really means to practise globally today.

What emerged was a picture of an industry in flux; confident in its international influence, yet increasingly alert to questions of cultural authenticity, responsibility, and identity. Our panellists debated the pressures of overseas work, from navigating human-rights concerns to managing the rise of homogenous 'Pinterest globalism' that risks flattening local character. They spoke candidly about how studios are drawing their own ethical lines, where they see new opportunity, and how a renewed emphasis on place – not just style – is shaping the next chapter of global design.

To kick things off, Tim Bowder-Ridger, Partner at Conran and Partners, shared what is currently driving the most interesting work for the practice right now: "We have seen quite a shift towards hybrid projects – a simultaneous mix of architecture and interior design – which is, after all, what we're trained to do and what we really want to be doing, so that's quite exciting."

Bowder-Ridger explained: "Terence Conran wasn't an architect. I joined him in 1997 and actually working for a non-architect probably taught me more about how to be an architect than I would have ever got from an architect because he very much held the perspective of the end user – he used to pull me up if I started talking like an architect."

He continued, "At the moment, the ideal balance of our work would probably be 50-50, but it's about 70-30 in favour of international now."

"The three things that our team said they were most concerned about with working in any country are LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, and the death penalty."

Tim Bowder-Ridger, Partner, Conran & Partners

From top
Tim Bowder-Ridger, Partner, Conran & Partners; Nick Johnson, Director, Johnson Pinney

FLUCTUATING MARKETS

Around the table, practices had a varied take on the level of international work being undertaken. Nick Johnson, Director at Johnson Pinney, explained that his practice works predominantly with luxury retail brands as well as hospitality and residential. He said: "Over the last ten years, we've worked extensively in Europe for a number of luxury retail brands. Retail is an interesting sector. There's a strong cycle of projects – flagship stores in particular."

He paints a constantly changing picture, marked with a fall away in UK projects post-Brexit, as well as a fall-off in activity in China compared to the investment boom there of ten years ago. The

result, he says, has been a shift of emphasis to North America and across Europe. “But actually, I think the UK now is probably one of the most under-invested markets. I think what you will see on streets like Oxford, Regent, and Bond Street in the next three years is going to be seismic in terms of the amount of change. The conversations I’m having with clients now are very encouraging. I have more leads in my book now than I’ve ever had and 90% of it is retail and it’s all in the UK, whereas most of the past decade has been spent focusing on prospects across Europe. So it has come back full cycle.”

The discussion shifted to some concerns though over reports that wealthy clients are leaving the UK in significant numbers due to the current taxation system making it less attractive to live here. However, it is far from a clear-cut picture, with others around the table pointing to a huge take-up of high-value residential developments as a sign that the UK – and London in particular – are far from in the doldrums.

Clockwise
Tim Bowder-Ridger, Partner, Conran & Partners; Chris Thornley, Associate Director, Conran & Partners; Simon Bone, Principal, Perkins and Will; Nick Hoggett, Partner, **dpa** lighting consultants

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> ***Nick Hoggett, Partner, dpa lighting consultants***

Bowder-Ridger said: “It’s all comparative. The reason why things have slowed down for us here isn’t because of the lack of clients, it’s because of the planning system. The congestion around the Building Safety Act means we have got projects which have been sitting in planning for two years.

“What we as a practice try to do is always have three key markets, with the hope that even if one of them is going through a tough time, the other two are buoyant. Unfortunately, in the last five years, all of them have been really struggling, but the thing that has given us light at the end of the tunnel now is that the Far East has really ignited just in the last three months, and suddenly, all this backlog is coming at us.

“How long it will last we don’t know because these markets go up and down all the time. We should all be used to that and we shouldn’t worry about it. I don’t think we should worry about London in that respect either because it will reinvent itself just as it does every 15 years or so. I think what we need to do as an industry is think about how we can add to it as these other developing markets really kick off. Traditionally, we didn’t work in the Middle East, but in the last few years we’ve focused more on the region because obviously there are massive opportunities there – not all of them right for us as a practice, so you have to be quite smart about it, but they are worth considering in any case.”

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Nick Hoggett, Partner at **dpa** lighting consultants, said: “I think there’s a really exciting opportunity at the moment for the established practices that

have a proven track record of delivering high quality projects. In countries like Saudi Arabia, they are really focused on the importance of delivering, with a huge emphasis on 2030 and the World Cup in 2034. So, they want practices with a proven track record of delivering and that means those with a strong reputation are able to command good fee levels because the clients don't want to risk anything. It's a really big selling point for anyone with a track record and who has fabulous teams who are experienced in actually delivering projects."

Perhaps another competitive advantage for UK-based firms could be national perceptions and the record for creative excellence that has long been associated with architecture and design firms here. Dan Hajjar, Managing Principal at HOK London, said: "The culture and education system in the UK – and I can say all this as a third party!

– is all about inquiry and inquisitiveness. That passion is what drives the unique quality behind the research and development that happens here, behind the innovation that happens here, behind the artists and other creatives that come out of the UK.

"There is a whole cultural aspect that you don't necessarily have in the US. And nor do you have it

"If you're passionate about what you do... that is what sells the services abroad. It's the real passion behind what you do that people are interested in."

Dan Hajjar, Managing Principal, London, HOK

"How much has ethics come up in your businesses about working in certain countries, particularly those with laws and cultures that don't very closely align to here in terms of law and discriminatory practices."

Matt Jackson, Director Interior Design Co-lead, Hawkins Brown

From left
Dan Hajjar, Managing Principal, London, HOK; Matt Jackson, Director Interior Design Co-lead, Hawkins Brown

in other parts of the world. People kind of look at the Brits and kind of say, you know what, there's something different; they're quirky, but they're on to something. I think that the country as a whole sometimes sells itself short because here you are not supposed to brag about your achievements. It's more a case of letting everybody else talk about you and don't talk about yourself.

"But if you're passionate about what you do – and international clients expect you to be passionate about what you do – that is what sells the services abroad. It's the real passion behind what you do that people are interested in."

THE ONLY WAY IS ETHICS

Matt Jackson, Director, Interior Design Co-lead at Hawkins Brown, asked about the international issue of ethics: "How much has that come up in your businesses about working in certain countries, particularly those with laws and cultures that don't very closely align to here in terms of law and discriminatory practices.

What's the process in the Board of Directors deciding to go ahead with operating there?"
dpa lighting consultants' Hoggett replied: "I think it's really tricky because if you say that we can't work somewhere because they're anti-gay, they discriminate against women or they have the death penalty, then you need to consider all of the wider issues in almost every country. If we rule out working in Saudi Arabia, then do we have to count out China, or even the States because they provide weapons to the world – as in the UK too! It's really tricky, and we've certainly had these discussions, but it's a case of where do you start?"
Bowder-Ridger suggested: "We have a strong policy not to put any of our people onto projects that they are not entirely comfortable with, let alone send them to those countries. The three things that our team said they were most concerned about with working in any country are LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, and the death penalty.
"When we look at a new market, we firstly look at the Foreign Office advisory notice as that's mainly a question of safety. And then we go onto Human Rights Watch, an organisation that undertakes a rolling audit of all the countries around the world. It's comparative, and notable that, in fact, the UK doesn't do terribly well, and the US does very badly."

EVOLUTION THROUGH DESIGN

Bowder-Ridger added: "For me, looking at where these countries are now in terms of human rights is only half of the equation. At least as big a factor is what direction are they heading in? Do you want to be part of a country that holds the moral high ground but is going downhill fast, or do you want to be part of a process which is actually trying to make the world better? There is a real role for us here in helping to shape a more progressive outlook in certain countries."
Johnson agreed that looking ahead is important, but added that looking back on a country's past journey is also an important contextual consideration. "Some countries have seen an unprecedented level of wealth creation in an incredibly short period of time but, culturally, that cannot keep up with that rate of investment. If we have the skillset and the experience to be able to help to create or support a vision that they have, then it represents an exceptional and very exciting prospect."
He suggested that some countries have very different political environments to the UK for example, but that this difference can also create the right conditions for transformation. "There are numerous examples of ideas and infrastructure projects that we could have accomplished here from a design perspective but which don't get off the ground, because the governance in this country is cyclical. Governments think about their electoral cycle and are reluctant to commit to projects that go beyond their own short term, whereas in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Singapore for example, the vision is more bold and long-term."

"Referencing the local vernacular can be really important and it can be really fun to work with a brand on developing that."

Nick Johnson, Director, Johnson Pinney

Clockwise
Nick Johnson, Director, Johnson Pinney; Matt Jackson, Director Interior Design Co-lead, Hawkins Brown; Tim Bowder-Ridger, Partner, Conran & Partners

EMBRACING ADAPTIVE RE-USE

The conversation moved on to the topic of sustainability and the growing appeal of adaptive re-use, even in countries in the Middle East where the 'demolish and rebuild' approach had

been entrenched. Bowder-Ridger said: “It is a conversation that I’ve been pleased to be able to have with clients in Saudi Arabia. They had a massive building boom in Riyadh in the 1950s so there are many sites that need bringing up to date, but they are saying that they don’t necessarily want to flatten these old buildings. That is a shift in mindset because if you go around the world, certain areas of southeast Asia – Bangkok for example – there are some fantastic, vibrant cities but they can be architecturally disappointing because they previously flattened everything that ever felt authentic. There is a real opportunity because we, as London practices, are good at this kind of thing and could be exporting that around the world.”
HOK’s Hajjar agreed: “They are very much open to it in Saudi, not least because as a nation, they are very proud of who they are and they don’t want to lose their culture. Let’s not forget, it’s the country with the two holiest sites in Islam and they have a duty to maintain those for the entire Islamic world. As a result of that, it’s perhaps more intrinsically embedded for them to hold on to their culture in a way that is perhaps not the case in some other countries.”
Simon Bone, Principal at Perkins and Will, said: “I think that’s also partly our responsibility. We talk about exporting ideologies, creativity and innovation and the UK is one of the leaders in ESG. There’s a big opportunity there.”

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From top
Theresa Dowling, Chair; Simon Bone, Principal, Perkins and Will

LOCAL TOUCHPOINTS

Alongside this, another aspect of working on the global stage is the importance of being able to blend creative ideas with local heritage, culture and identity. Failure to do so leads us down an identikit world of familiar-yet-characterless buildings and spaces. Perkins and Will’s Bone added: “I think there is always a risk of homogenisation – of looking on Pinterest and seeing the same style and same fashions anywhere around the world – and that’s a real shame. I think our responsibility in terms of industry international design is connecting with that local culture and identifying what’s unique and different. It’s through taking that kind of approach – and showing real attention to detail – that some of our most successful projects have come about.”

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Johnson highlighted the example of recent work his practice has undertaken for luxury watch brand Audemars Piguet, which brings an innovative 'townhouse' concept to its retail presence. He said: "Every Audemars Piguet house around the world is incredibly geospecific and the one we recently undertook in Manchester is no different. It has a music room that referenced Factory Records, and the iconography of the worker bee, the symbol of the city. There were layers upon layers of design references involved.

"Interestingly, the only one of these locations in the world that wasn't so site-specific was Tokyo. Audemars Piguet designed this one themselves because they said they didn't think it would be possible to do it to the extent that Japanese clients would look at it and say, 'This is real Japanese culture'. But in general, referencing the local vernacular can be really important and it can be really fun to work with a brand on developing that.

"Sadly, the alternative is what the architect Jan Gehl once called 'bird shit architecture', because it feels as though it has been dropped from the sky without any context."

Occasionally, it hurts to see a project ride roughshod over the true aesthetic ethos of a particular region. Tommaso Gimigliano, Associate at **dpa** lighting consultants, said: "We were once doing a project with a Japanese interior designer in Italy and they were trying to interpret the Italian Middle Ages feel, but it was so horrible. As an Italian, I felt so awful just seeing what was being done to ruin those ceilings. Sometimes, we have difficulties to overcome in these situations, but even so, the client was very happy with the result."

It is certainly a question of balance – selecting the right reference points (both from the client's brand point of view and also of the locale and safely steering around any risk of pastiche. Chris Thornley, Associate Director at Conran and Partners said: "Brand pillars are one thing, but local context is another. We worked on a hotel project for Park Hyatt in Changsha, China. There was a case for bringing Chinese history into the scheme – traditional screens and patterns for example - but in fact there was a greater focus on contemporary culture, referencing the fashion and TV rather than the heritage.

"They wanted it to represent more about the here and now and the future of the city. It's interesting and totally understandable too because the same would apply here – if we were doing a project in the UK, we wouldn't reference oak panelling and cliché British references, we would want a more modern take."

What united these diverse voices was a belief that international practice now demands more nuance, self-awareness and cultural intelligence than ever before. The opportunities are vast, but so too are the responsibilities, from championing and respecting local identity to careful consideration of the ethics behind every commission. The challenge is not simply to work globally, but to do so with purpose, sensitivity and conviction. If the next decade of international design is to be defined by anything, our panellists suggested, it will be by those willing to engage deeply, think critically and help shape a more thoughtful, context-driven global design landscape. The UK's architectural and design skills are in demand. For now at least ■

From left
Tommaso Gimigliano, Associate, **dpa** lighting consultants; Chris Thornley, Associate Director, Conran & Partners

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