# THE UNEXPECTED PATH TO GLOBAL PROJECTS

**Theresa Dowling** continues her series of Design Discussions with some of the world's most powerful architectural and design practices, on why UK skills are in demand, and the cultural and lasting effects on building overseas

Words and images by **Toby Maxwell**

**THANK YOU TO OUR GUESTS**

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ILLUSTRATION BY DEEP ON UNSPLASH

International work is often framed as a strategic ambition – a marker of scale and influence. But for many practices, the reality is far less structured. This discussion explores the issues and consequences of working abroad, not least how global commissions are secured, delivered and sustained, often through a combination of visibility, timing and unpredictability.

"I can tell you a story about how we got one of our foreign jobs," says Jonathan Manser, CEO of The Manser Practice. "You spend a long time trying to get certain types of work and you can't find it – and then something comes in through the back door." That 'something' arrived as an email from China – one that Manser initially ignored. "I initially thought it might just be spam and I binned it. Then it came again. And again. On the third day I thought, 'Well, maybe I'll have a look.'"

The sender turned out to be one of China's largest housing developers. Within 36 hours, Manser was in Shenzhen working on a prototype for micro-apartments. "We hadn't had any plans to do that type of work anywhere... there is sometimes less planning to all of this than you might think. You take the work when it comes in," Manser says. "And if it comes in from abroad, you do it."

"The whole world is one client base now. It doesn't feel like we're working abroad – we're just doing the work where it is"

***Jonathan Manser, CEO, The Manser Practice***

**From left**
Jonathan Manser, CEO, The Manser Practice; Nick Hoggett, partner, dpa Lighting Consultants; Simon Allford, executive director, head of design, AHMM; Brendan Heath, director of interiors, SHH Architecture + Interiors

For Brendan Heath, director of interiors at SHH Architecture + Interiors, the trajectory was similarly unplanned. "We had a random email – and that developed into three projects in Guangzhou, a major scheme in Hong Kong, three projects in Shanghai, and a project here in London... all off the back of one email."

Across the discussion – hosted at AHMM's self-designed offices in London's Clerkenwell – such accounts were not unusual. They point to a shared understanding: that international work is often less the outcome of deliberate expansion strategies and more the result of visibility, networks and chance encounters.

## STRATEGY VS SERENDIPITY

For an industry that frequently presents global reach as a product of careful planning, the experiences shared suggest a far more fluid model. Opportunities rarely emerge from targeted geographic ambitions alone. Instead, they are often triggered by indirect exposure – a project seen, a recommendation passed on, or a client encountering work in an unexpected context.

Heath describes how one of his practice's key international relationships began not with their own project, but with a derivative one. "The developer had seen a coworking space – not even ours, but a second project that had taken elements from our original design – and said, 'I want whoever did that.'" Once that initial connection is made, however, momentum can build quickly. "It just kind of grows from there," he said.

If many international opportunities originate

elsewhere, the network often still leads back to London – not simply as a source of design expertise, but as a place where global practice is actively shaped. "One of the things this country does best is export design and professional services," says Enrico Caruso, director of design interiors at HOK. "It's just one of the hotbeds of design and architecture in the world – London especially. So, it makes perfect sense that people are reaching out to this community."

That visibility underpins many of the seemingly 'random' opportunities described earlier. Projects are encountered indirectly – through publications, second-hand exposure or built work – and then resurface elsewhere.

But while London's role as an exporter is well established, several participants argue that its global relevance depends just as much on its ability to absorb. Theresa Dowling raised the question of whether international work was a two-way street, with the welcome given in London to big international celebrity architects; namely Calatrava, Renzo Piano and Daniel Libeskind achieving great projects here.

"To be an international capital city, global city, you need to be absorbing," says Simon Allford of AHMM. "You have lots of offices absorbing foreign talent at employee level, but you also have to be welcoming and not sort of saying 'it's our turf'."

That openness, he suggests, extends beyond individuals to practices themselves. "Importing people, but also importing established practices who then do really good buildings that challenge London – that's what we need."

The alternative, he implies, is a form of defensiveness that ultimately undermines the city's position. "When you see that in other cities, it's not a good look. If you want to be globally confident, you recognise that."

This exchange is not abstract but is rather embedded in how practices operate internally. For Karl Sharro, partner at PLP Architecture, the composition of the studio is directly tied to its ability to work internationally. "Our practice is probably about 80% international," he said. "China, Singapore, India, Europe – I have colleagues from all across the globe."

That diversity is not incidental, he adds, but part of a deliberate positioning. "From when we first opened up in 2009 up to around 2013 or 2014, perhaps around 90% of our work was not just in the UK, it was in London specifically. But you could see what was coming down the road, so we decided to rebrand as an international practice and we said we have enough diversity within the office for people to go and open new markets within their countries of origin. For Japan, for example, English is of no use in a professional setting. If you don't speak Japanese, you're just wasting valuable time waiting for the translation."

"We got ahead of the curve and now we're in a position where no single market that we deal with has more than 15 or 20%, and that covers Japan, Singapore, India, the Middle East and Europe. We've just gone into Brazil now too. It all gives you quite a lot of resilience but we wouldn't have been able to do that without having those international colleagues who both speak the language and simply know how things are done in those territories."

In this sense, London's global reach is not simply about exporting a design language. It is about hosting a concentration of people who can operate

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*Simon Allford, executive director, head of design, AHMM*

**Left and above**
Karl Sharro, partner, PLP; Simon Allford, executive director, head of design, AHMM

across multiple contexts simultaneously – culturally, linguistically and professionally.

Of course, a varied portfolio of regions also cuts the risk of keeping every egg in a single basket. Collin Burry, principal at Gensler, explained: "Oftentimes, international work can be a hedge against recessions. It can pay to be geographically diverse. If one market is down, you can probably go to another market. San Francisco was always quite boom and bust, so during the lean times it made sense to focus on China or the Middle East where the conditions would typically be quite different."

## DIFFERENT MODELS OF GLOBAL PRACTICE

While the routes into international work may be unpredictable, the ways in which practices structure themselves to deliver it tend to fall into clearer patterns. "There are two models," says Allford, executive director and head of design at AHMM. "There are lots of offices around the world – or there are projects. You go, you do the project, and you work with a local partner."

For large global firms, scale requires structure. Gensler's Burry describes a system built on distributed leadership with coordination maintained through internal systems. "It's almost like little mini firms within the firm. When I started at Gensler, we were around 600 people, and now we're almost 7,000. Managing 7,000 people from central command doesn't work so there's a Monday morning call across every office... sharing what's been won, what's been lost, what's coming up," he said.

Others favour a lighter approach. "We will go to do the project, form a local partnership and build it," says Allford. "We're not trying to open lots of offices because it's heavy on bureaucracy and quite risky."

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> ***Brendan Heath, director of interiors, SHH Architecture + Interiors***

**From left**
Rob Owen, head of interior design, The Manser Practice; Collin Burry, principal, Gensler; Brendan Heath, director of interiors, SHH Architecture + Interiors

For Sharro, the distinction is strategic. "Everything that we design across the world comes out of the London studio," he says. "We have four international offices, but that's not where the design gets made. In some locations, such as Tokyo, it made sense to open an office because we had a lot of repetitive business and it was better to be there, but conversely, we have major projects in India but have never opened an office there and don't plan to. It wouldn't do any good because the ecosystem is completely different. They don't need me to be there as they know all about our work."

The choice between models reflects different priorities – control versus flexibility, presence versus adaptability – and the varying demands of global markets.

## MARKET CONTRASTS

If international practice is shaped by opportunity, it is equally defined by where those opportunities are viable — and where they are not. France, for many around the table, represents one of the more challenging environments. "I think it's the most difficult country to work in in the world," says

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Nick Hoggett, partner of dpa Lighting Consultants. "They're the most resistant."

Simon Allford added: "We've done competitions in France with French-speaking people. If they're not from the exact region, it's problematic," he says. This sense of resistance is not unique to France, but it is perhaps more explicit. As Allford suggests, perceptions of other markets are often overly optimistic. "The grass isn't always greener... you look at Holland or Germany and think it's wonderful, lots of competitions," he says. "Then you talk to the architects there and realise they can only win a job through a competition – and it's hugely expensive."

By contrast, Japan is described in almost entirely positive terms, though not without its own conditions. "I think Japan is the best place to work in the world," Hoggett says. "Contractors have the most amazing design teams... their attention to detail is better than some architects."

The structure of delivery is also distinct. "You've got these huge organisations... architects, engineers, contractors all built in," Allford notes, describing a system in which smaller design teams operate alongside large technical "machines".

India presents a very different dynamic — one defined by speed, scale and accessibility. "You land in the morning, pitch, leave in the evening... and the week after, you sign the contract," says Karl Sharro. "And it becomes a pipeline of work." That

**Left and below**
Enrico Caruso, director of design interiors, HOK; Karl Sharro, partner, PLP

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ease of entry is supported by shared language and business culture. "Everybody speaks English. It's very straightforward," he adds.

South America sits somewhere less defined. Rob Owen, head of interior design at The Manser Practice, asked about people's experiences working within that continent. "We've just done our first project over there. It's a market that often doesn't get talked about very much but it's quite an interesting region."

"It's not obvious how you develop your presence there," Sharro said. "We've had opportunities that never quite materialise." Language again plays a role. "Luckily, we have quite a lot of Portuguese speakers – that changes the dynamic completely," he adds.

For some, however, the region represents significant potential. Collin Burry of Gensler notes that his practice is actively investing there. "I'd say it's easier to work in South America than it is in India and some other places. We're seeing it as

a huge growth opportunity," he says, pointing to a developing market that is becoming easier to access than some established ones.

Across all of these examples, a pattern emerges. International practice is not a uniform condition, but a patchwork of distinct markets, each shaped by its own regulatory systems, economic structures and cultural expectations.

## ETHICS AND AMBIGUITY

Working internationally also raises ethical questions that are not easily resolved, particularly when it comes to countries that have significantly different laws and societal views to the practice's own. However, there was a warning against the rush to take on the role of arbiter. "There are very specific cases where it's easy to say, 'We don't want to work there or take on that job', but there's a danger that you're moralising from your own standpoint," says Allford. "You have to be very careful of that."

"To say 'these are our values and your values are wrong' is, within reason, quite arrogant. We all have to be very careful of making that judgment. Those that do might find that they can't work anywhere at all because the money's flowing in from all kinds of different sources. So, of course, in some cases there is a judgment to be made, and if it emerges, our rule is if it is considered as tricky in someone's mind, then it is discussed. But we don't have a kind of ethics committee to review every project because it becomes a very dangerous territory."

Hoggett suggests a pragmatic approach. "You can name so many countries who are either supplying arms, engaging in wars or doing other things that we can all question, but ultimately if a member of the team isn't comfortable working somewhere, you wouldn't put them on the project."

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**From left**
Enrico Caruso, director of design interiors, HOK; Collin Burry, principal, Gensler

Nick's colleague, Ela Karel Keen, senior associate at dpa Lighting Consultants, added: "Also, you can't make a change without actually going there and speaking to people. It's not our job as designers to be making political changes there but I think the more people and working practices mix the more we can help to share ideas and raise standards globally."

Allford points out that while moralising is dangerous ground, maintaining professional standards is not even in question. "There are factors such as design settings and issues with how projects are being built, such as substandard buildings in earthquake zones. All of these are a lot easier to make a decision on because we all have professional responsibility to build well."

## A ONE WORLD CLIENT BASE

As the discussion develops, the distinction between domestic and international work becomes increasingly blurred. "The whole world is one client base now," Manser says. "It doesn't feel like we're working abroad – we're just doing the work where it is. 40 or 50 years ago it might have been very different, but our better-connected world is a much smaller place now."

Advances in communication and travel have flattened many of the traditional barriers. "Instead of getting on a tube, you get on a plane," he adds.

International practice, in this sense, is no longer an exception – it is the default condition. Despite this normalisation, working internationally continues to offer something distinct. "When I'm in London, I get five minutes on each project," Manser reflects. "I go out to Addis Ababa and I'm on one project for three days and I'm not thinking about anything else... the relief of actually concentrating is enormous."

That contrast – between fragmentation and focus, familiarity and difference – remains one of the enduring appeals of global work. The discussion suggests that international practice is no longer defined by geography alone. It is shaped by networks, by movement, and by the ability to respond to opportunity as it arises, whether planned or entirely unexpected ■

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*Ela Karel Keen, senior associate, dpa Lighting Consultants*

**Clockwise**
Nick Hoggett, partner, dpa Lighting Consultants; Ela Karel Keen, senior associate, dpa Lighting Consultants; Theresa Dowling, chair

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