



Having survived the Asian stock market crash of 1997, dwp (Design Worldwide Partnership) is no stranger to operating under difficult circumstances. We talk to CEO, Brenton Mauriello about about his strategy for surviving the current downturn

**“W**e’re not here to plod,” Brenton Mauriello, CEO of dwp or, in its entirety, Design Worldwide Partnership, insists. “That’s just boring.”

Testament to this, perhaps, is the opening of four new dwp offices so far this year – two in Australia, one in Malaysia and one in China – as well as a recent move to new premises in Dubai.

In spite of the turbulent global economy, the company has continued to invest, ploughing effort and energy into

business development and marketing. As a survivor of the Asian stock market crash of 1997, the firm is well-versed in dealing with crisis and, arguably, particularly well positioned to navigate the current economic climate. We speak to Mauriello about lessons learnt, business strategy and the benefits of being a ‘suit’ in a creative industry.

**Tell us about dwp.**  
It is an amalgamation of companies that started in Asia. The oldest company

was Cityspace, which was started up in Thailand by Kristina Zanich and Scott Whitaker in 1994. And then we have another company that was started up by David Chang and John Chue in Vietnam, called Attitude.

They were independent and didn’t know of each other. Then there was the Asian crash of 1997 and Kristina and Scott got some consultants in and said: “Right, how do we protect ourselves?”

One of the ideas was that you bring like-minded companies together, you

1. Brenton Mauriello.





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give them synergies and you create a common platform, if at all possible. So, they created dwp, which was a bit like a Star Alliance.

There were four companies; they had a common look and feel but they were independent – they were known as dwp Cityspace in Thailand, or dwp Attitude in Vietnam, for example.

Why Design Worldwide Partnership? We didn't want to be tied to any one location or any one person. What the alliance did was allow us to have some commonalities. We put in common IT systems, common marketing and common project management procedures.

This went on for about five years and then we realised that if we were really going to exploit the synergies, we needed to take the next step.

Kristina and Scott approached me and asked whether I would be interested in joining them as a partner, and I took up the challenge. We amalgamated all of the companies into one.

**Did you face any resistance?**

There was one of the original companies that dropped out. It wasn't so much of a resistance but a difference in where they wanted to go. You can be part of an alliance but that's a different thing to becoming one company. Some might say: "I actually just want to stay parochial; I only want to focus on this area; I don't want to grow too much; I don't want to go on the next big mission". And that's what we wanted to do.

We amalgamated and we also increased what we did. We were already very strong in what we now call 'workplace', but we invested in people and brought in expertise, and we went into retail, hospitality and architecture in a bigger way.

It's now one office, one look, one feel. If you walked into the Thailand office, it looks like the Dubai office. If you walked into the Bahrain office, it's in a house, but it looks the same. The idea is that we are very much one company.

We are totally connected in terms of our IT. We have a quality management process for our projects which is the same in every country.

Whilst we don't standardise design, the process that supports it is standardised, which allows us to focus more on the design itself. You don't want to be fighting IT systems, you want to be focusing on design.

**Are there any pitfalls to working on this scale? Isn't it more likely that a standardisation of design will occur?**

We are very lucky because we are totally diversified. I think you get a standardisation of design when you have one office, led by a few key people and they are all sitting next to each other. Then you get what I call 'group think'.

Over time, you start to see this. Part of our heritage is that we will not be associated with one person's design and also we do different types of work – from retail to hospitality to residential.



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**You come from a business background. How does design differ from other industries that you've worked in?**

I think with any business, the basic functionalities are the same. I've been in construction and healthcare, and the basics are the same.

One of the major differences I see between this industry and others is the human resource management. You are dealing with creative people, to a large extent. This requires a different management, a different way of inspiring people, a different career development approach. Some might say that it's more emotionally-driven.

If you are dealing with a bunch of accountants, it's different. They like certainty, functionality, very clear direction. They like boundaries. Creatives don't. You have to manage that.

I'm sure you'd get a similar feel in an advertising company. And in the big big advertising companies they have the 'suits' and they have the 'creatives'.

**Do you benefit from not having a design background? How effective are the 'creatives' in running businesses?**

I think they are successful in a different way. I also think it's beneficial when you have a mix. I think even if you are a suit, you have to have an empathy and an understanding, and I believe that I do.

I have an empathy but I am definitely business driven. I think that plays out with the clients as well. They like to see that firms are professional and we give them that. We are entrepreneurial and creative, but we are also well run.

It gives them assurance. And design is all about trust. You can have a beautiful building with beautiful interiors but if they don't function well, they are just a statement to the designer's ego. That's not our philosophy.

**As a businessman, how did you approach the current crisis?**

I was lucky because the other owners are also very entrepreneurial and we'd

been through this before. I'm not going to deny it, we've had to become more efficient. Maybe you just have to wear more hats. At the same time, we cranked up our business development and our marketing. Our name is out there a lot more. We've gone and projected ourselves. We've said we won't cut and run like other international companies.

**Have you had to lay people off?**

We've had to downsize and rationalise. Not in the Middle East but in Asia, by around 15%. But we've probably made it up because we've brought on new offices. We've opened up in Australia, Malaysia and China, and we've moved offices in Dubai, so it has probably balanced itself out.

We looked at things and said, right, we need to be bit tougher. We'd look at the delivery and we'd ask: 'Can we deliver what the client needs, without having the bells and whistles?'

And yes we can, actually.

6. The project has become a Thai landmark.





**Were there any regions that were particularly badly affected?**

Singapore and Hong Kong, I would say. They are our largest offices anyway and they were hit hard. I think most of the redistribution was from there. They are export driven and Singapore is down 15% in terms of its GDP. But then we picked up in Thailand, Bahrain is still doing very well and we’ve also picked up work here in Dubai.

I think we’ve done the right thing by not pulling back and by going on the offensive. Yes, it hurt. When cash is king and you are spending that cash, with no projects on the table, you do have sleepless nights, but it does seem to be paying off.

**How is the Middle East market different to the Asian market, would you say?**

It’s very different here. But when it was booming it reminded me of Asia, pre-97; that was scary. We knew what was coming so we invested but were considered.

**Do you have any regrets about the timing of your entry into this region?**

We don’t really lament things. We have great relationships within our company.

We never look back at what we should have done. It’s too late. Yes, we get hurt sometimes and we take a knock, but you just have to pick yourself up.

You can ask Kristina or Scott or David what happened after 1997. There was nothing; there was not a single project. Nothing. They still kept going. They still turned up for work. And eventually it comes back. You don’t cut and run.

And that’s what we’ve done here. You crank it up – get out there, network, meet people, give them confidence that you are going to deliver the best design. Try something different.

**How do you maintain those great intra-company relationships?**

I never doubt my partners’ and the managers’ commitment to the company. If I make a mistake – and I’ve made many – I don’t think anyone can look at me and say that I didn’t do what I thought was best. And that I didn’t work all day and all night to do it!

**What’s the biggest mistake that you have ever made?**

Trusting too many people for too long. You try not to become cynical. I have a


family business back home in Australia and my father once said to me: ‘If I can’t trust my people then I don’t want to be doing this’. I’ve never ever forgotten that. But sometimes we’ve tried too hard with some people, to the detriment of the company.

There’s a famous quote, I forget who it’s by, that says that one of the roles of the CEO is to weed the garden. And I think that sometimes I haven’t weeded well enough.

**What are the plans for the future?**

I’m very bullish on the Middle East. I don’t care what anyone says. It will be tough but there’s still a need in this part of the world.

Let’s look at Dubai – it still has the best port, it still has the biggest airport, it still has the best transit system, it still has the best accommodation; it has an infrastructure in this region that nobody else comes close to.

Will it take longer to finish? Yes. But I saw that in Thailand. There must have been 50 buildings that stopped in Thailand. Their bull run before 1997 was exactly the same. And it took a little longer to finish, but they eventually did. 

7. Sirocco offers stunning views of the Bangkok skyline.

8&9. The Capital Club in Bahrain.