

THAI DESIGNERS ARE AT A PREMIUM

The MD of a leading design company says international clients are now turning to this part of the world for design services *By Nina Suebsukcharoen*

Top designers who have their fingers on the pulse of the regional hospitality industry foresee boutique hotels mushrooming in Thailand while bigger projects of 300 units or more will continue to be launched in China and India.

Saeed Zaki, managing director of Design Worldwide Partnership (DWP) company, which from its local roots has now branched out to 10 countries, said that Thailand's very mature hospitality industry means demand for large high-end hotels is low, but this need is still strong within the two Asian giants which are both recording strong economic growth.

"So that is an advantage for Thai consultants because they are remarkably advanced in this area since Thailand is a key tourism and hospitality hub."

DWP increasingly runs into design companies from Thailand and the region when competing for projects overseas, which Mr Zaki said shows that clients are now turning to this part of the world for design services.

"Thai design is highly regarded and recognised in both China and India. Yesterday I even got an enquiry from an African company — they came looking for designers for a very high-end luxury hotel in Uganda."

Aside from having won some hospitality projects in India and receiving lots of inquiries from hotels there, DWP is also designing luxury residential projects in Ludhiana, a city in the northern part of the country, and a very high-class hospital in Mumbai called Seven Hills.

And somewhat surprisingly, on top of its hospitality design work in China the company is also doing a posh retail project in Hong Kong.

Mr Zaki said the fact that DWP was approached to do a retail project in Hong Kong again shows the maturity of the Thai design industry.

He reiterated that Thailand is tracking the trend in more mature markets to shift from the construction of really big hotels to developing a more personalised product of about 40 to 100 rooms.



KEEPING BUSY: DWP's Osmannagar project in India, above and inset, and Cafe Mozu, right.



One example of a boutique hotel that DWP designed recently is Rest Detail in Hua Hin.

"Boutique means you have a smaller size but cater to the very high end."

"And it's very personalised — you feel that it is catering to the individual needs of tourists or vacationers."

"While the business traveller may want something predictable, tourists would go in for a unique experience and something different."

So we try to create this uniqueness through our design."

Mr Zaki also expects the continued increase of high-end food and beverage (F&B) outlets in Thailand. DWP's designers have a lot of experience in this field, having designed Sirocco Bar and Cafe Mozu at State Tower. He said designing restaurants is challenging because their lifespan is usually quite short.

"You start an F&B outlet and the chances of it lasting a very long time are really slim. I mean, how many outlets can you name in Bangkok which have been around for a long time and are still successful?"

"So it's a challenge for designers to come up with ideas and concepts that will ensure a relatively longer lifespan."

Designing restaurants also usually means

working within extreme budget constraints because it is very risky for operators to splash a lot of money on the decor.

"I cite the example of Cafe Mozu. Our approach was to revamp the theme through minimal intervention by using carefully chosen decor and completely transforming the space from an ordinary breakfast kind of a place into a theme restaurant that comes alive in the evening."

Mr Zaki expects more investment to flow into opening posh F&B outlets, not only in Thailand but also India, where his company is already doing a signature restaurant in Kolkata and has been approached by other parties to take up similar projects.

That Thai companies such as DWP and Italian-Thai Development Plc — which built Kolkata's airport — are doing well in India is clearly because of cultural affinity, said Mr Zaki.

"Many Thai companies are going there because of cultural similarities and I think it's also much easier to integrate," he said, adding that DWP has been able to command respect and earn good fees in both China and India.

"Everybody wants good service, and once you give it they are willing to pay."

Although DWP secured several projects in the hospitality, lifestyle and health care industries that helped it weather the ongoing global economic crisis during the first six months of this year, Mr Zaki admitted that the flow of work had decreased in the office and residential sectors since 2008 and the onset of the economic troubles.

However, the company has seen office and residential projects rebound over the past two months, and has secured the design for one a very high-end project in Bangkok, as well as the renovation of Siam Commercial Bank headquarters at SCB Park.

Mr Zaki said that DWP is now heavily focused on designs that are environmentally sustainable. In fact, this was the theme of the company's recent Design Week, during which designers came up with various ideas to integrate green features into their designs.

"They created little mock-ups within the work area to display the concepts."

"We invited clients, to show them how we are integrating sustainability in design work and every day of the week we had lunch seminars on various issues about sustainable and green design. We invited different [green] organisations in Thailand to give lectures to our staff." ■



CULTURAL AFFINITY: Saeed Zaki thinks similarities between India and Thailand have made it easier for his company to land jobs in India, like the high-end hospital Seven Hills in Mumbai shown left.