

## Designing Minds

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Hotel Design



What, exactly, is global design? Is it a perception of aesthetic, doing business in an international arena—or something else all entirely? At **Miami's Betsy Hotel**, *Hotel Design* along with sister publication *Hospitality Architecture + Design* sat down for breakfast with six designers and three sponsors to try and answer these questions among other subjects affecting the design industry.

Here is a snapshot of where our debate went and what we tried to identify as being global design.

Moderated and edited by **Tony Smyth**.

### Panelists

**Andrew Chiu**, Principal/Regional Director **Asia Pacific DiLeonardo International**  
**Nunzio DeSantis**, FAIA, LEED AP Executive Principal **HKS Hospitality/Hill Glazier Studio**  
**Karrie Drinkhahn**, IIDA, LEED AP Vice President/Principal **Gettys**  
**Jonathan F. Douglas**, AIA Managing Principal **VOA**  
**Callin Fortis**, Principal **Big Time Design Studios**  
**Barrie Livingstone**, ASID Principal **Barrie Livingstone Design**

**Smyth:** *How would you define global design, in as much as how it affects your business and how you look at what it is, what you used to do and also if—and how—it's changing from when you just worked domestically?*

**DeSantis:** I'd like to comment on what this recession means for a lot of full-bodied, full-service hospitality, leisure, lifestyle, architectural firms. From an interior standpoint, I still think there's some serious domestic work in the U.S., but this recession has forced our industry to look beyond the typical boundaries. I think that's extraordinarily important. Because when I think about what the experiences have been these last two, two and a half years, it's all about diversity. I don't mean diversity in the sense that we typically say it, but when you think about culture, approach, attitude, people, distance—the diversity of what we've learned through this global challenge is extraordinary.

We've had to transform and reach. The thirst and the quest to inspire is different and you handle it differently in this global endeavor. I find it incredibly invigorating, because you used to go to the table knowing who you were and who your competitors were. Now you go to the table like a young child, and it's really quite remarkable. It's very refreshing, it's exciting and it's challenging. But I think that we all have a commonality, and I think that is that we want, to deliver an experience that is memorable and lasting.

I see the upper crust of the clientele going out to market beyond their own boundaries and going to seek those talents in different locations. That's what's made us very viable in pursuing this work elsewhere.

So it's a very different play. What used to be an edge for a firm located in **Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Jordan** or somewhere, is not so much a benefit these days. Because these clients are really interested to reach out because they can see that the value of our service has come down—not what we give in terms of value—but our competitiveness out there. There's so many things that we don't control that still define us. I'm playing around the clock.

**Chiu:** Well, these days, in the region I'm most active in, which is **Asia**, the Chinese clients are really shaping how we do business just because there's so many of them compared to the rest of the world, and there are so many more active projects. Not only do we have to be the best [at our head office in the U.S.] but we also have to have a local team that can suit their needs on a real-time basis. They don't want to deal with the time difference and coordination efforts. So our business model really had to make adjustments even though we did have a **Hong Kong** presence already. But we still had to start making adjustments as far as what the staff does over there, and the way we communicate with each other. Technology has definitely helped with that part of it. And in terms of just doing global work, there is, I think, a global movement where hospitality design is going. I also think that in different regions it's at different stages of that movement at the same time. You've got to be on the ground and spend a lot of time working with the people. Everybody's different.

**Drinkhahn:** Yes, you must be on the ground, but you also must be on your toes. We're working with our Hong Kong office quite a bit, too. The design expectations are the same, but just when you think you know what the design process is, you find out you don't. The timeframe in Asia is so much shorter and the expectations on deliverables are so great so the timing is everything—you're constantly learning.





**Smyth:** Looking at design aesthetic, if there is a definitive American style versus a global style, is there a paradigm shift that is taking place now, to look outside our local influences and be influenced from outside and bring these back home, too?

**Drinkhahn:** I think if there was, it's starting to merge. Ten years ago, you would work on a project here in the U.S. and know how long your thematic design was and how long your design development was. Now we work on projects that move very quickly. We work on projects through our Hong Kong office where the entire documentation is done in four or five weeks. So that process has definitely changed. As far as styles, it's kind of expanding your knowledge base, your understanding and your diversity and knowing what the local clientele might be looking for and what different aesthetics might be appropriate or not appropriate. It's not just one specific style. So I think that process for me is just about becoming more global and understanding because you're able to do so much more.

**Smyth:** Callin, you talk about need versus want. Is there an education process that we can bring here to a global arena?

**Fortis:** I'm fortunate enough to do extremely high-end, personality-design driven concepts. I did an international rebranding of the biggest nightlife chain in the UK, called **Gatecrasher**. They really wanted to have that American sort of sensibility and design, entertainment and specifically nightlife, so they went on a six-month search to find the perfect move for their 15-year-old brand. Despite their [UK] economy lagging a little behind, I watched them spend £8 million as if it were the U.S. in 2000. What I really took note of is that the sensibility between the clients there and here [U.S.] were exactly the same. People want to be entertained, they want to be in an inspiring environment, they want great music; and, they want a place to be with their friends. What they don't need is a \$3,000 table or lots and lots and lots of the latest technology. The clientele are really starting to shift back to more of what I call an analogue world, where things are sort of warmer and richer and a little more familiar. At one point, we saw everybody wanting the best of everything and it was a challenge. So while you may want all that stuff, what you really need as the end user, are the exact same things that you needed 10 years ago.

So the challenge for us was really to come up with this metaphor of a digital world and an analogue world. I'm finding myself shifting away from all the latest technology because any designer can factor in a \$150,000 stealth screen if the budgets are there; that's not that much of a challenge. But what is a challenge is to create the emotional resonance you may get from a stealth screen but do it in a familiar—analogue—affordable way without sacrificing the patron's experience. Because what we do is experiential. People are there for a minute. I don't do residential so the people that I affect don't see my work 365 days a year. This is my quick take on need versus want. I do that now with every project. I go in looking at what I think the demographic really needs, as opposed to what they may want.

**Smyth:** So it's not just back to basics, but back to some fundamental sort of look at how design builds emotion.

**Douglas:** A lot of times designers are coming from locations with certain biases in place; whether it's a way of doing business or the way that they want to document a project. And what we pick to clarify our projects is really about understanding culture and understanding what some of those biases might be. Our work is almost all involved from a sustainable tourism concept, which is that you don't want to take anything more away than what you bring, so there's sort of a net zero effect, both from the cultural and physical perspective. That means that you have to do a lot of homework to figure out that, for example, in Dubai, you may have cultural biases about orientation of the building or amenities that we may not even pick up on until way after the design work has been completed. Obviously, it's the same thing with **China** or somewhere else, so understanding those things becomes part of that breakdown of the local experience. People expect it.

The other part of what we're doing is looking at how cultural biases play into design. People have expectations. They come to **South Beach**, for instance, where everybody wants to be something. Or you go to **China**—everybody has expectations of being something else. Those cultural biases may motivate good behavior or inappropriate behavior depending upon the type of venue. It's a little bit of an academic discussion about what is the right experience to create: Is it where everybody's going wild at a beach bar? That's a great experience, but is it the best experience for people to have?

**Livingstone:** That cultural context is number one. I read an article that said that today's international traveler, when they wake up, wants to know where in the world they are. It struck a chord, because right after that, I went on a trip to see a client in **Panama**, and I had to check out of one of the big brand hotels there, which was like a very bad two-star style hotel. I had a terrible experience, and I checked right into the only thing that was available—a brand new **Courtyard by Marriott**. They did it so right. I walked into that room, and I was immediately in **Panama, in Central America**. It was perfect from the color between the throw, the artwork, the accessories—and it could have been anywhere in the world, but with those accessories, artwork and photographs, you immediately knew where it was. It was not only the black and white pictures of the **Panama Canal**, there was something green and alive going on in the hotel that made you aware of that theme.

**Smyth:** How do we look at increasingly sophisticated emerging market clients and manage their expectations and impressions of what constitutes international design?

**DeSantis:** Our greatest challenge is expectation—here in the U.S. and abroad. We as designers know we can deliver. We've got a lot of people behind us to make it happen. We need to understand those expectations, because from every boundary, from every location I go to, whether it's for a Sheikh or a CEO, they all expect a process differently and expect you to deliver in a certain way and inspire them in a different way. Pulling that from them takes a tremendous amount of effort. You can't handle each client in the same manner. You may not have access to the Sheikh all that much, so you get one little spurt of information and then you're dealing with five or six other guys under him that honestly have no idea. You may be doing a really personal super-luxury private resort for him to showcase to the most significant people he flies in from all around the world. This is his own little capsule of perception. To get that understanding of what his expectations are, through all these other people, it's really difficult.

So as we move through this global realm of design, we've got to remember, first and foremost, that we're people serving people. If we get that right, we're there.