



**Sydness Architects: Planned hotel and condo complex on the Nile River in Cairo, with retail on four levels at the base and a floating pool in the river**



**Tsao & McKown Architects: The IMC Tower and Residence at the Agora, in Qingdao, China, includes a 51-story, 936,000-square-foot office tower and a 30-story, 96-unit condominium tower**

## When Small Firms Venture Abroad

Knowing little details can make overseas operations a success  
By Claire Wilson

**Y**ou'd think there would be so many things that would discourage small architecture firms from working abroad. Fear of the unknown. Worry about getting paid. Cultural minefields. Language barriers. Bureaucracy. Sexism. Building codes. Earthquakes, even. Who needs it?

Need it? Maybe not. Want it? Seems so. More and more small New York firms are taking those international commissions and have few, if any, downsides to report. The fees are not the same but for the most part the jobs are unusual, the travel interesting, and the foreign partnerships enriching personally and professionally.

Audrey Matlock, AIA, principal in Audrey Matlock Architect, has projects in Trinidad, Kazakhstan, and Turkey. Her New York staff of only 12 is nimble enough to take on these jobs. She manages the firm and can do whatever she wants, she says. "I don't have to run through a bunch of partners, and nobody has to run through the financials or say whether it fits into the overall marketing plan," she explains. "If I encounter an opportunity I think is interesting and good for the firm and myself, I will jump on it."

K. Jeffries (Jeff) Sydness, AIA, principal in Sydness Architects, now has a staff of five, down from about 12 before the economy sagged. Among other projects in Asia, his firm designed the St. Regis Hotel in Shanghai. He says that a staff of 10 to 15 is ideal for taking on foreign jobs of any scale. "Be lean and mean so you can do what you want without all the overhead," says Sydness, who did numerous international projects with his former firm, Johnson Burgee Architects.

Practically speaking, a staff of two is too small to take on work abroad, according to Vrinda Khanna, partner with her husband Robert Schultz, AIA, LEED AP, in the four-year-old Brooklyn-based Khanna Schultz. A staff of five or six like they had in the past was a better size for the firm, which has done many projects in Khanna's native India. These included warehouses, office buildings, and residential housing, among others, all for the same client. "Two is hard because of the traveling," she notes. "You want to have people in the office so the burden of travel doesn't always fall on one of the two of you."

Whether a staff of one or team of 15, international business would be impossible without the available technology. Firms rely heavily on teleconferencing between far-flung offices, and the use of third-party servers and FedEx to transmit large drawings. Louise Braverman, FAIA, has a staff of six in her eponymous firm, Louise Braverman Architect, which is designing a women's health pavilion in the African nation of Burundi and a museum in Portugal, the Centro de Artes Nadir Afonso. She travels frequently to both places but communicates



**Khanna Schultz: Completed in 2010, the 10-story St. Leo Road Apartments in Mumbai, India, includes a double-height pool/gym area above the ground-floor lobby, and seven full-floor apartments**

electronically most of the time. "We work on Skype, have meetings, view drawings, and share information every week," she explains.

According to Khanna, technology is important but only when partnered with the hands-on approach, since many architects often do basic drawings and then make changes at the site with the contractors present. "The value of making those decisions on-site cannot be stressed enough," she says. The Mumbai native also believes it is important for foreign architects to spend large chunks of time in a country to better understand culture nuances, architectural precedent, materiality, and how space is used. She and Schultz, who is American, spent three years living and working in India, where they now do many projects.

That kind of time is a luxury, but sensitivity to local norms coming out of long stays is an imperative, according to Sydness. He notes the importance of seemingly minor details like seating arrangements at dinners in Shanghai, where everyone at the traditional round table for 10 wants to sit next to the architect, considered the honored guest. "There is a certain amount of diplomacy that goes with it, and some Americans are not always the best travelers," says Sydness, who is awaiting the green light on a project in Egypt. "You have to be careful."

All say language is a challenge, but trying to learn the patois has certain advantages too, according to Matlock. She is studying Turkish to enhance her interactions with colleagues in Istanbul and Kazakhstan. "It is valuable even if you only make the effort to show you have some investment in their culture," she says.

Local partners are key to successful projects. They handle document translation, navigating building codes, tax codes, local corruption where



**Audrey Matlock Architect: Tian Shan Mountain House, Almaty, Kazakhstan**



**Louise Braverman Architect: Centro de Artes Nadir Afonso, Botijas, Portugal**

present, and government agencies. "Always work with someone local to avoid getting charged extra or being misinformed," cautions Khanna.

Braverman works with a local firm in Portugal, but in Burundi the partner is the Village Health Works, a non-profit with years of experience in this particularly rugged geographic and social landscape. "They are excellent," she says. "It is all collaboration."

One unusual thing these small firms have in common is that with rare exception, the first international clients came to them — the firms didn't seek them out. Matlock has a client in Trinidad, who one day walked off the street into her New York street-front office, liked what he saw, and hired the firm to do a luxury waterfront leisure complex. Braverman's African client found her through an online search. Calvin Tsao, FAIA, partner in the 20-person Tsao & McKown Architects, won a competition to do the 8-million-square-foot Sun Tech City complex in Singapore many years back, but gained no new clients. Then the West Village apartment he did for his sister was published in a magazine, and the offers poured in — for product design, fashion-show stage sets, retail stores throughout Asia, housing projects, and a planning project in Istanbul.

Firms successfully operating abroad were happy to have the extra revenue as the U.S. economy tanked and so many projects were put on hold. But according to Tsao, consistent international success comes at the end of a long process of network building and can't be done overnight. "It is a little late if they do it in a way that is meant to save themselves," he says.

Claire Wilson writes for the *New York Times*.