

NORTH AMERICAN DESIGN

THE FOUR PILLARS OF DESIGN

Swanke Hayden Connell Architects (SHCA)

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Founded in 1906, Swanke Hayden Connell Architects (SHCA) is an architecture firm that also has interior design and historic preservation practices.

This level of experience has given it time to develop a large project portfolio that includes some big-name clients and high-profile projects. To quickly name drop, the firm has worked on the Statue of Liberty and is one of four architects to ever work at the U.S. Capitol. Even with more than 100 years of experience, how does a firm attract clients like these? Swanke Hayden Connell says it is the result of consistent quality and creating and shaping the marketplace in which it works.

"We combine many disciplines in our practice, which is one of our strong suits," **U.S. COO Joe Aliotta** says. "For a long time, interior design was separate from architecture. For example, in the 1960s, the corporate interior design standards of today did not exist. We worked with the manufacturing industry to develop products that would improve the workplace, such as indirect lighting, the Herman Miller work station and Mecco shades. This was instrumental in bringing the architecture and design fields to where they are today."

Based in New York, Swanke Hayden Connell has another office in Washington, D.C., as well as in London, Moscow, Paris and Istanbul. It also is opening a new office in Shanghai.

"This is not the greatest economy, so we are using it to our advantage and spending the time working to expand," **U.S. CEO Peter Gross** says. "We are taking this time to grow and push outwards, and it is making us more competitive."

North American Design recently spoke to Aliotta and Gross about the firm's various markets and what consideration to make when taking a U.S. architecture firm global.

North American Design: Is your firm focused on a particular market segment or geographic area?

Peter Gross: We are very keen on our current geographic areas, but we are looking elsewhere. We see Istanbul as the key to our expansion in the Middle East. Moscow is a slow market now, but we have a presence there and are poised for when it comes roar



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ing back. We are one of the few western architecture firms who is licensed to work in Russia, and that is a key advantage for us. We are also looking to expand into Abu Dhabi, the Middle East, North Africa and Southeast Asia. We are working in India right now, and we will definitely expand there.

NAD: How do you expand into new markets?

PG: We have different strategies. If we are going into a developed market, we must have a strong local presence to be successful there. In less-developed international markets, however, you can get away easier by just working with a local partner. Regardless, the key to our expansion is to provide the level of services and quality that we know the market needs.

When going into some of these new areas, we have to take a new mindset - we have to use a more collaborative process. However, it's also important that we know how to put documents together and work through the regulatory process of building in these areas.

NAD: What are some of your current projects?

PG: In our international work, we have a large mixed-use project in Shanghai - it is a three-building complex of office spaces and a hotel. We also are working on a very large multi-unit building in Moscow. Domestically, we are doing a lot of healthcare work - that

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market is growing rapidly.

NAD: What types of services do you provide?

PG: The United States and Europe have the most advanced building quality standards in terms of space, technical aspects and the level of finish. When we are working in other countries, they want that technology and those standards brought to their projects.

However, local standards and products are often not of the same caliber as what you would find in the United States and Europe. Local contractors may not be used to doing things a certain way, but it is our job to help our clients achieve world-class spaces.

Clients come to us wanting to be world-class, so we have to fight against the different trade practices. We have to convince, explain and communicate why a new way might be effective for them. You especially see this on healthcare projects. The U.S. healthcare system is still the gold standard for the world, and so international healthcare providers want U.S. architects involved in their projects around the world.

NAD: How do you stay competitive?

PG: We are unusual in the mix of disciplines we offer. Our mix is unusual, but together, they are a strong combination. As a result, a client may want to engage us for more than one discipline. We can trade information, experiences and sensitivities because of the diversity of expertise at our firm, and we often collaborate internally to improve a project.

Joe Aliotta: On a recent project, we won over the client during our first presentation. We showed them layouts for various client types, and they responded enthusiastically. They told us they had never worked with an architect who had done that.

NAD: How are you doing in this economy?

PG: There are fewer jobs and more competition, so we have to get better at what we do. We are focusing on providing projects faster and cheaper, but also better. We are all the better for it.

JA: We are doing a lot to improve our operations. For example, we're using building information modeling on our projects, which gives a big boost to efficiency.

PG: Technology is important in our ability to remain efficient. Our offices are global, so our firm is working 24 hours a day. We are all linked on video conferencing equipment.

NAD: What is your vision for the firm's future?

PG: We will definitely be pushing harder in developing new markets. However, our key strategy is to increase the imperative of our sustainable agenda. It is an architecture morality issue - we have to take responsibility to design and develop buildings in a better way. This is a big deal, and we take it very seriously.

Sustainable design is already a part of what we do, but we have to continue to make it a part of every aspect of our business - our philosophy, products, everything.