

# DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

## Colo. architects seize overseas opportunity

LOCAL FIRMS HAVE DESIGNS ON PROJECTS FROM KAZAKHSTAN TO AUSTRALIA

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So an architect walks into a bar and orders her hamburger with pineapple and cream cheese. No joke here. That's a true story.

And it's one reason why some U.S. architectural firms – many in Colorado among them – like doing business abroad: they get to experience different people trying, well, different things.

It's a story Karen Smith, vice president of BAW Architecture PC in Denver tells about the time her firm was doing a project in Atyrau, Kazakhstan. She and her business partner, Brad Walker, hosted several architects from Kazakhstan in Denver and took them to the Cherry Cricket, the well-known burger joint in Cherry Creek.

"You want to do a lot of team building and dinners. On the last day, a Friday, we decided to forego the usual sophisticated venues and took them to the Cherry Cricket and they loved it," Smith said. "They'd never eaten a burger – they eat horse meat on Fridays. They told us they liked Denver more than they expected they would."

Of course working internationally isn't all burgers and



KATHLEEN LAVINE, BUSINESS JOURNAL

*Donaldo Visani is a senior principal and architect with Ohlson Lavoie Collaborative, an architectural firm in Denver that specializes in health clubs. He said up to 20 percent of his firm's work is done abroad and that it has offices in Tokyo and Cairo.*

smiles.

Smith said it often poses many "special challenges" and mentioned a BAW project for a petrochemical company in central Asia as an example.

"The tax implications were so complicated we had to hire special counsel," Smith said. And it took a year just to negotiate the contract. All documents had to be in two languages, which meant we had to hire interpreters and translators."

Regardless of the inherent difficulties, Smith said U.S. architectural firms are doing more international work.

"That trend does exist because that's where the opportunities and development are," Smith said. "And it's not just in our area of expertise, which is manned control buildings for petrochemical, mining and transportation operations, but in all areas of architecture."

Smith said U.S. architects are

sought because they employ best practices.

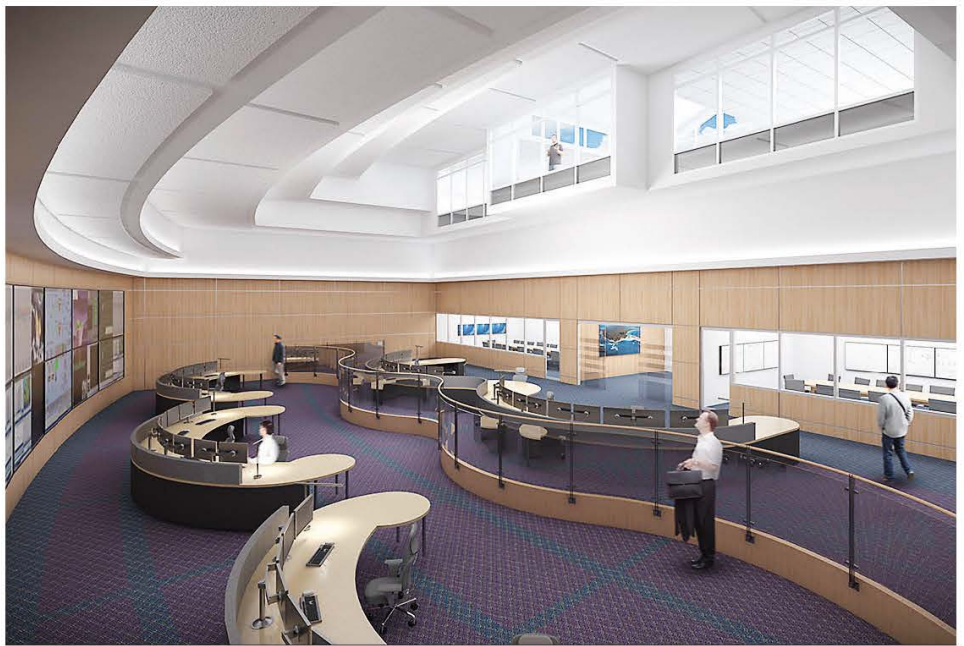
“The U.S. is where the expertise is. Also, it’s perceived as prestigious to use a U.S. [architectural] company. There are a lot of good architects in Germany, for example, but there’s a certain prestige to going with a U.S. firm.”

She added that 75 percent of BAW Architecture’s work is international. The firm started working abroad in 1997 in Perth, Australia, designing an on-shore control building renovation for energy giant, Chevron.

“We had an existing relationship with Chevron from prior projects here in the United States,” Smith said. “Chevron was one of the owners of the Perth petrochemical plant. They recruited us for that project.”

Donaldo Visani, senior principal and architect with Ohlson Lavoie Collaborative, an architectural firm in Denver that specializes in health clubs and has been doing work internationally since 1988, agreed that there is international work to be had, but isn’t sold on the idea that there’s a full-fledged trend of U.S. architectural firms doing more international work.

“That’s a tough question. It used to be there was definitely a boom in international work a few years ago, but right now, I’d say the work is probably down,” Visani said. “I think right now it feels like it’s level – there’s not as much of an increase [in international work] as before because of the exchange rate – and now there’s quite a bit of work in the U.S. But those of us who have overseas work certainly welcome it and we’re



PROVIDED BY BAW ARCHITECTURE

*Rendering of a control center currently being built in western Australia designed by BAW Architecture in Denver.*

pursuing that work.”

Still, Visani said there are added burdens of language, local customs and time differences. “You can’t make an assumption that just because you send out an email or a sketch that the recipient has received it or understood it. You have to follow-up and be persistent.”

Ohlson Lavoie Collaborative is now working on the Al Murooj Athletic Complex in King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia, that will include swimming pools, tennis courts, soccer fields, a climbing wall, full gymnasium, bowling alley, spa and a restaurant and coffee shop.

Visani said up to 20 percent of his firm’s work is done abroad and that it has two international offices, one in Tokyo and another in Cairo.

Jim Jose, a principal with Path 21 Architecture & Planning in Denver and president-elect of the Colorado chapter

of the American Institute of Architects, agreed with Smith that U.S. architecture is appreciated around the globe.

“U.S. architects are known for best practices and we do have a lot of respect abroad,” Jose said. “As far as trends go, the one I see is that many international clients like the look of U.S. architectural work, so they bring in U.S. firms to help them get started and then they take over the rest of the work and complete their own projects.”

Jose added the national office of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) backs U.S. architectural firms doing work abroad.

In fact, two years ago he traveled to India as part of a foreign trade mission with AIA representatives for some relationship building.

“I know the AIA is very supportive of international work so we’ll probably see those efforts continue,” Jose said.