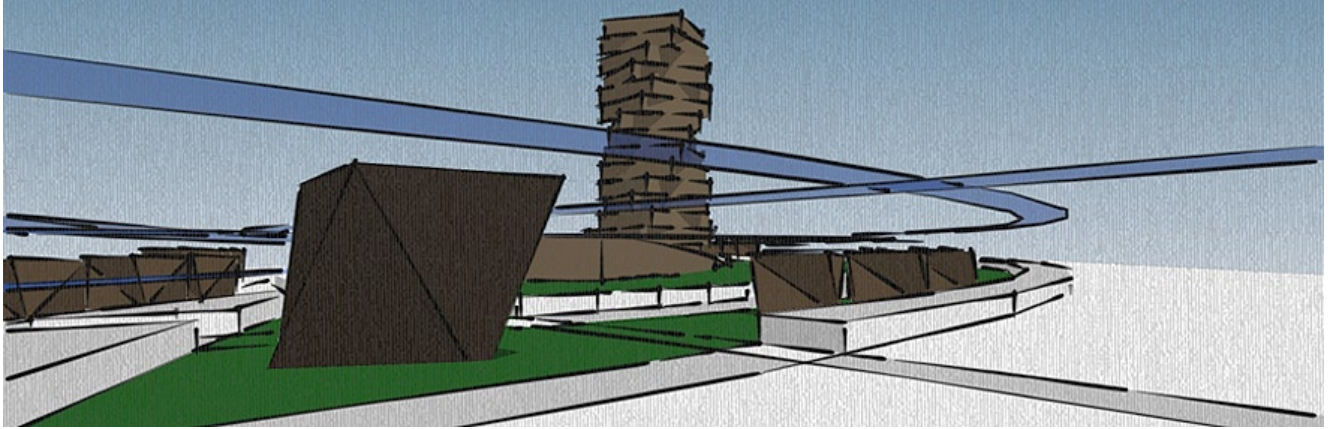


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A GOLF VILLAGE MASTER PLAN FOR BOMNAE CONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN KOREA

## Environetics Working Internationally

*Reclaiming a Design Legacy*

by Brad Powell

In previous decades, only large international architecture firms had the infrastructure and other resources to work and build in non-native countries. Today, that's starting to change and many A&D firms, regardless of size, recognize that the international scene, even during a global economic downturn, presents attractive business opportunities. In addition, those in the design community who have a farther horizon are becoming increasingly aware of their global role and power.



DAVID RUSH, MANAGING PRINCIPAL, ENVIRONETICS NEW YORK

"Initially, when many large design firms began working in foreign countries, they were building upon their home-country business relationships," said **David Rush**, managing principal at the New York office of **Environetics**. "Corporations were going global and their architecture firms were following them. Today, many design firms of all sizes have the desire and the capability of reaching new corporate clients in their homeland. At Environetics, we want to introduce ourselves to decision makers in successful corporations regardless of where their headquarters is located."

Founded in New York in 1946, Environetics's design history includes a rich legacy of building office environments with over twenty office locations worldwide during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. After many ownership and organizational transformations during its 65 years in business, Environetics remains true to its founding core principles of client service, enhanced collaboration, and adaptability to changes in business and the environment. Its staff of over 70 spread over five independently-owned sister offices in NYC, Philadelphia, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Los Angeles, and, most recently, Seoul, South Korea (officially, "Republic of Korea"), collaborates regularly on projects.

"The firm's founders established an interior design market in countries where it had never existed," said **Annie Lee**, design principal at the Environetics New York office. "We are adopting that same approach in Korea right now. There is a large and vibrant practice of interior design in Korea today, but not necessarily in the way we understand it in the US. What we are doing now is very similar to what Environetics was going through in the forties and fifties."

Born in Korea, Ms. Lee began the firm's initiative to look

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for work abroad during a trip back home. “I spent most of my summer in Korea last year and found that it is a very closed design and business community, very hard to get into from the outside, especially as a woman. My desire to work there was personal; I felt there would be a different kind of creative reward with design projects in the country that I came from. Shortly after I returned to New York, I became very interested in getting work for Environetics in the Korean market.”

Originally trained as a buyer in the fashion industry, Ms. Lee is familiar with lateral transitions in adjacent creative industries. The adaptability she embraces is one of the cornerstones of any form of design.

“Everything the world is doing affects us” said Mr. Rush, and what we do in North America affects the rest of the world. That became very obvious in the recent economic downturn. The Internet has given everyone access to information instantly over great distances; it is remarkably easy to work, talk and to do business globally these days. With that said, we only have so much time and money to invest in something like this; targeting Korea

just happened naturally for us.”

Environetics’s first job in Korea grew out of a chance meeting by Ms. Lee on a flight from New York to Seoul; she was sitting near a Korean building developer who struck up a conversation after watching her work on a set of floor plans.

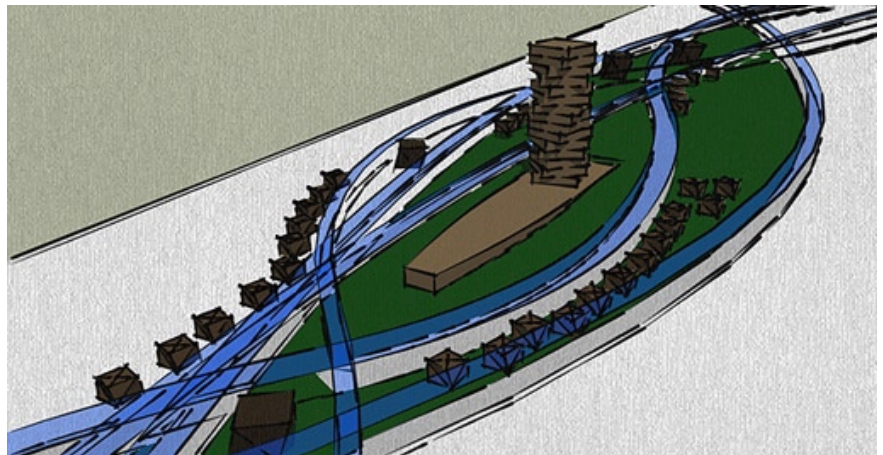
“In Korea, most people don’t even use the phrase “interior design” as we know it here,” said Ms. Lee. “I had a very hard time getting the nature of my services across to Korean clients. They understand the phrase “interior

design” as referring to decoration, curtains, pillows, wallcovering, that sort of thing. Then, if I discussed duct work above the plenum in a project or talked about two layers of sheetrock for the walls, they think I am a builder. In locally designed projects in Korea, interior design as we know it is considered as part of the builder’s job. Architects design the interior spaces to a certain degree; the builders then fill in the gaps with an in-house interior design team.

“But, most Koreans are interested



WORKING LOCALLY: ENVIRONETICS DESIGN FOR THE NEW YORK OFFICE OF PHILLIPS VAN HEUSEN



A PRELIMINARY MASTER PLAN BY ENVIRONETICS FOR A GOLF VILLAGE IN KOREA



ANNIE LEE, DESIGN PRINCIPAL, ENVIRONETICS NEW YORK

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in **LEED** and the **U S Green Building Council**,” she said. “So, when I started talking about sustainability and green design, they opened their eyes, and finally I found a way to explain my services a little differently. As we discussed the need to implement sustainable design concepts at the very beginning of the design process to reduce costs, they began to see what I could bring to the table in a

new light. That was the turning point for me and provided the foundation for continuing to invest in the Korean market. I did a green presentation to a Korean city council before I left. I’m heading back there to follow upon it.” (Ms. Lee is also currently working with **Cheryl Durst**, EVP and CEO of the **International Interior Design Association (IIDA)**, to open an IIDA chapter in Seoul, the first in Korea.)

Environetics has found that the deliverables required by South Korean clients are not the same as in the U.S. “South Korea wants our design expertise,” said Mr. Rush. Clients there don’t want us to do construction documents. We’re giving them design packages that are full of finish ideas and program concepts. The client, which is typically a builder or developer, will carry it the rest of the way. The liability is pretty easy to deal with, and for us, it is more about design than it is anything else.”

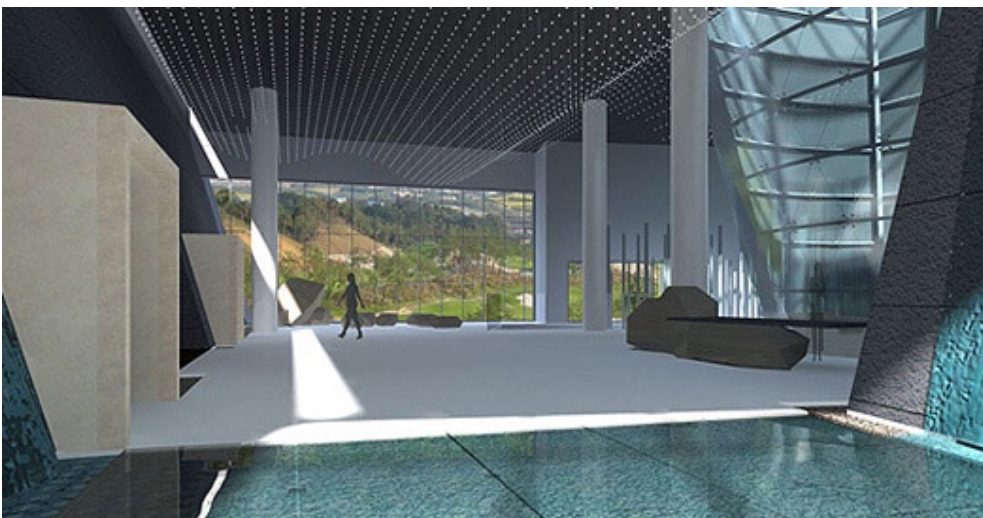
“We are excited and intrigued at being able to work in a different way, but it isn’t unfamiliar territory” said Mr. Rush. “We often take packages prepared by foreign design firms and translate them into code-compliant drawings for projects in New York.

Other cultural barriers do exist. “There is still a strong preference for male leaders in the workplace in Korea,” said Ms. Lee, “Although things are improving. While there are many female CEOs in Korea, and there are many associations today that promote female business owners and CEOs, there is still a sentimental or cultural block. Clients will sometimes tell me they need to speak with my boss before proceeding further. In addition, everything happens through formal introductions in Korea. It is not a casual exchange of business cards. You have to be properly introduced by someone who the prospective client respects. If I am properly and formally introduced to someone in Korea, they feel an obligation to listen to me.”

Once the proper introductions are in place, however, meetings happen very quickly. “In Korea, actual physical presence is far more important than it is here,” said Ms. Lee. “For some reason, even though I am always a few clicks away, potential clients don’t send me emails or text messages when I’m back in New York. But the minute I land over there and tell them I am lo-



DAVID RUSH AND ANNIE LEE WITH SEOUL CITY HALL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS VISITING THE ENVIRONETICS OFFICE IN NEW YORK



A 3D RENDERING OF A RESORT IN KOREA, DESIGNED BY ENVIRONETICS

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cal, they call me a short time later and we schedule a lunch or dinner meeting the next day; I don't have to wait a week or two to get a meeting."

Communication styles vary throughout the world, however. "I speak Korean," said Ms. Lee, "and yet I have been in meetings over there where it was unclear at the end of our time together if the answer was yes or no. The nuances can be subtle; we overcome that by showing them an image of what we are talking about."

Because Seoul is 14 hours ahead of New York, Mr. Rush and the rest of the New York staff have a window of time to complete urgent requests. Conversely, Ms. Lee, working in South Korea, can pick up some of the design slack during a tight New York deadline. "It's like having an overseas entity working for us," said Mr. Rush. "We often use Skype to visually communicate." Now the New York Environetics office is installing a large teleconference system to facilitate further Skype meetings.

"Late night meetings are really efficient for both of us," said Mr. Rush. "We often work longer hours to accommodate the time differences; it is a sacrifice that we are willing to make, because it works for the firm. Not having Annie in New York is a challenge, but it doesn't make us ineffective."

"I am looking at our staff in New York a little bit differently ever since we began this global initiative," said Ms. Lee. An increased awareness and sensitivity to different cultures, as well as management styles, inevitably influence everyone involved. "I feel that instead of buying into a platform, it is possible to build our leadership in-house and send our team leaders out to the market."

As a method for growing the firm's business, cultivating leadership from inside is a great way to empower the staff and keep a loyal workforce. "I think it is a fair comment" said Mr. Rush, "to say that when you look at how we want to staff our firm, we can't afford specialists who work on one

type of thing. This would cause us to farm-out too much work. Environetics has multi-taskers. Thinking back to when I started in design, the senior people who hired me were looking for someone to take over the firm when they retired. We have some people on our staff now that are being developed with that in mind, people who can become leaders that sell our services and deliver completed projects."

Environetics's New York office has answered the who, what and where of its quest for international business. One question remains: Why? "Clients understand what we're trying to do," said Mr. Rush. "They get it because their businesses are working through the same issues. They're receptive to how we work, and they're curious about how we are doing it. Fortunately, there are many clear signals when it appears that we can work together, and the technological is available to make it very feasible. For example, many smartphones now have a video-conference capability. We can see site conditions in real time wherever we or overseas clients are located."

The pace of economic development and progress has accelerated greatly over the past century. "We are educating people in the U.S. that come from all over of the world," said Mr. Rush. "They see what we have and they return home to replicate what they see as desirable, and they often can achieve in 10 or 15 years what it took us more than 100 years. Korea is clearly overtaking a lot of the world market in automobile manufacturing, appliances, televisions, and many other areas. Financially, it is restructuring in many ways and is achieving success. When companies make money, they attract investment and grow. We expect Korea to become a very big player in the world economy."

Positioning the firm to take on the challenge of working internationally requires constant attention to produc-



WORKING GLOBALLY: AN EARLY SKETCH OF A GOLF VILLAGE COMPLEX, DONE FOR BOMNAE CONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN KOREA

tivity and workplace dynamics. “The ways of doing business constantly change,” said Mr. Rush, “but what doesn’t seem to change is the number of design professionals that can be managed successfully in a cluster; I have found that it is typically fifteen to twenty people. A larger group needs to be subdivided to achieve the greatest productivity. I think our office is at right size now, and Annie’s work-style may be the wave of the future.”

Making inroads into a new market is a strategic investment. “We are not blindly rushing into something we did not think about,” said Mr. Rush, “but we are also not afraid of taking risks. In pursuing international business, we have over 65 years of design legacy and experience to draw upon as we design our approach to competing with large firms.

*Peter Carey is president of Streamline Material Resourcing, a strategic partner for design firms and other institutions. Streamline optimizes resource and specification information for interior designers, as well as maintains resource libraries and archives. He can be reached at [pcarey@StreamlineMR.com](mailto:pcarey@StreamlineMR.com) or (347) 351-1000.*

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A RECENT ISSUE OF INTERIORS KOREA INCLUDES ENVIRONETICS'S ANNIE LEE ON THE COVER AS A RISING DESIGNER



WORKING LOCALLY: ENVIRONETICS RECEPTION DESIGN FOR THE CORCORAN GROUP IN NEW YORK