

**INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS**

Canadian architect designs in China to boost brand at home

ABIGAIL CUKIER

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It didn't take Joseph Loh very long to realize how difficult it is for a small architecture firm to compete for large-scale projects in Canada.

Rather than slog it out at home, he went abroad. And it paid off.

Mr. Loh entered design competitions and worked with research institutes in China and Canada on green architecture. Founded in 2005, LOH Architects Associates Inc. now has three million square feet of projects under construction and it is designing six million more.

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Its roster includes the Shanxi Datong Culture and Arts Centre, a \$500-million complex in China scheduled for completion in 2016. There's also an art gallery, a performance hall, four residential towers, an office tower, two hotels and a commercial centre.

"The market is saturated here [in Canada] and it is very competitive for large-scale projects in Toronto. To build your company doing smaller projects is a long way to go," Mr. Loh says. "You have to go to the emerging markets to get established."

Mr. Loh operates from his Toronto office. Since last year, it has grown from two people and a few part-timers to a staff of 10. The firm employs part-time and contract consultants in engineering and IT, HR, finance and marketing – all based in Toronto.

The trick is to convert overseas success into a stronger brand in Canada. "If you can generate experience in other markets, it will only make you more attractive compared with other companies that are only Canadian-focused," says John Miziolek, president and CEO of Reset Branding.

As for the old adage “think global, act local,” Mr. Miziolek is of the opinion it should be turned on its head.

“It should be ‘think local, act global.’ Think about what you can learn from companies in other countries. Get in front of companies that will help you develop your business. Then you can say, ‘If I can build this in China, I can certainly build your project here.’”

To help facilitate that process, businesses should find creative ways to leverage their overseas success back home, says John Hughes, managing partner of growth enterprises with Deloitte in Canada.

One of his clients in the transportation logistics business is building relationships in both China and Canada.

“People in China are looking for Western goods. So he is going back to Canada and finding clients. He is telling them, ‘You don’t know me but I am going to fill my truck with your goods and I will get you into China,’” Mr. Hughes says. “And China doesn’t know him, but he is showing what he can do for them.”

One key to Mr. Loh’s success has been creating a niche.

LOH Architects has partnered with Canadian architectural firms, Ryerson University and EcoSRG, a not-for-profit think tank funded by the LOH firm, whose researchers find ways to integrate sustainable technologies. And sustainable architecture is a growing trend, particularly in Asia.

“When you see our work, it sets us apart from everybody else in Canada and the international market. It combines avant-garde architecture with green sustainability,” Mr. Loh says.

But Mr. Loh cautions there are risks to working overseas. You need to know the local taxes, laws and practices. Signing contracts and getting paid can be tricky. “Ensure your company is financially viable within that framework,” he says.

Choose your location wisely, Mr. Hughes advises. “People often look to the United States, but it’s not always the right answer. You have to look into the size of the marketplace and the competition.”

At no other time have small businesses had such opportunities to expand internationally, Mr. Miziolek points out, citing technological connectivity. “Take advantage of those connections. There is no reason to give big corporations a chance to squash us.”

THINK BIG

Tips for small businesses looking to expand overseas:

Get help: “Consulates and embassies can be helpful,” says John Hughes of Deloitte. In addition, global professional consulting firms can be a rich source of information.

Show you're committed: You can't enter another market by staying in your office. "You need to make a big investment and send senior talent or hire a person in the local market," Mr. Hughes says. "They want to know that you are applying your resources and building a commitment to that new geography."

Build partnerships: LOH Architects works with local institutes and architecture firms on its projects, and invests in advanced design competitions, says the firm's chief, Joseph Loh.

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