

Working on the international stage in interior architecture

The World is a village

Working abroad on the international stage is expanding in all fields – and that applies to interior architecture as well. Big offices were the first to venture across the borders of Germany and out into the big wide world, because German qualities are much in demand. Throughout the world, “Planned in Germany” carries high prestige and is regarded as a synonym for quality. “International” does not immediately mean working together with countries like China or Vietnam; it could be Italy or Poland. In countries like France or England the percentage of small offices which operate abroad is considerably higher than here. The main reasons are that access is easier in particular because of the language and their colonial history, and so the inhibition threshold is lower. Additional factors may also be a certain safety culture in combination with a reduced willingness to take risks, both of which are often seen as being typical of the German mentality. Economically speaking, the best way for small offices to establish themselves abroad is to be carried there piggy-back by a strong partner and so to achieve market entry in an elegant manner.

German interior architect’s offices do not necessarily have the image that they are bursting with creativity, spirit, wit and inspiration. However, they are considered to be highly qualified. We have the reputation of not only being qualified in the professional sense, but also of being extremely reliable, conscientious, punctual and careful in our work. And that is correct, because our training is one of the best in the world, and because we also have a protected title that can be regarded as a brand. And: Germans are mostly too modest. By comparison, the presentation by Americans will quite naturally tend towards various “best-of” superlatives. So let us be proud of ourselves and wave the flag, not only for our profession, but also for our country. Just imagine that we have something to do with the football World Championships... which, incidentally, certainly contributed positively to our worldwide image.

The former title of Dipl.-Ing. (graduate engineer) was highly respected throughout the world. In the meantime, harmonisation within the EU has resulted in the introduction of Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees with the aim of facilitating the comparability of qualifications across the borders of Europe and the combination of Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees at different universities. However, the situation is not quite so clear for graduates when it comes to their registration in the architect’s chambers and their title as interior architect. This applies not only to professional recognition within Europe, but also in Germany. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explain the problem at length here. It is in any case advisable for students to find out in advance instead of facing surprises later. Irrespective of that, a German education is much in demand, although famous universities such as, for example, New York or London, are also very popular.

Expertise and contacts

The export of architecture and thus also of interior architecture is supported at federal level by organisations such as NAX (Netzwerk Architektorexport) by liaising with regard to expertise and contacts. In other countries there is considerably more support from the political side, and design and architecture are promoted. For example in that high-ranking delegations travel the globe, or at a local level there is more active encouragement of ranking than design competence, which translates into money in concrete terms. On the whole, the professional image of architects varies in practice throughout the world and the procedure of taking over all work phases from the design

to approval is generally the case in Germany. By comparison, outside Germany the tendency to reduce services to the first work phases is not unusual and a HOAI (Honorarordnung Architekten Ingenieure / Scale of fees for architects and engineers) is in any case unknown.

Things are similar in the case of interior architects, whose association lives on the common denominator "interior architecture", a training as a qualified professional and thus to be distinguished from the "designer" or the "decorator" both professionally and as regards content. In Germany, international work is encouraged in interior architecture even during the training period. Universities have recognised the fact and offer, for example, overseas semesters in widely differing places such as Australia, Asia or the USA. While I was at university, I personally completed an overseas semester in Jakarta/Indonesia – a highly exotic choice at the time – and I was the first student from my university to study there at Trisakti University. It was an exciting time and was enriching both professionally and personally. Furthermore, today the teaching language in some interior architecture study courses is English, thanks not only to the underlying idea of working in the international field but also as a concession to students from overseas.

Things elsewhere are not better or worse – just different

The basic attitude lies in the way we interact with other people: things elsewhere are not better or worse, but different. We should see this in a relaxed way, rather than taking German culture as our yardstick. Working methods differ considerably and the way people interact is based on mechanisms that are different from the ones we are accustomed to. From polite forms of address and how to deal with hierarchies to attitudes to punctuality and reliability, the attitude towards women, and last but not least taboos. If you completely ignore these differences it is all too easy to commit a faux-pas during the initial business approach or – worse still – with contacts that have already been established. Of course no one expects you to be more Japanese than the Japanese themselves, but it is advisable to know a few basics at the outset. To sum it up, important prerequisites for coping abroad include a different form of communication and openness towards the other culture, a willingness to approach it with an open mind and to enjoy the whole experience.

... Not to mention the language barriers, which can result in an impasse when things get difficult here. In most cases English will be sufficient, whereby most actors on the international stage will be non-native speakers who then – as is hardly surprising – understand each other without difficulty. If you speak another language – such as Russian, Polish or Spanish – that will be an advantage in the country in question and may also open up new business areas. Chinese interpreters, for example, have the disadvantage that things can become problematic if the interpreter does not have full command of the technical vocabulary and is clearly translating nonsense – which you may only discover when the queries start to seem very strange. So the professional aspect is just one side of things; the accompanying soft skills represent another problem and are absolutely essential for success in the long term. In principle it is no different from a little village in the country – except that the village is a different one. Welcome to the World!