

THURSDAY, March 29, 2007

สัปดาห์หนังสือ
แห่งชาติ ครั้งที่ 35 นานาชาติ ครั้งที่ 5
 Bangkok International Book Fair 2007
 30 มีนาคม 2550 (ปิดให้บริการ) 17.00-21.00 น.
 31 มีนาคม 2550 10.00-21.00 น.
ศูนย์การประชุมแห่งชาติสิริกิติ์
 Queen Sirikit National Convention Center
 Organized by
 สมาคมผู้จัดพิมพ์และผู้จำหน่ายหนังสือแห่งประเทศไทย
www.bangkokibf.com

ALL ABOUT CHINA 2,7

- Gift for Chinese students in poverty
- Nike changes to fend off rivals



BUY, SELL 3-6

BACKPAGE

- Congress urged on self-innovation
- Yangtze cities need synergy to stay on top



Architect finds his blueprint in 'alive' Bangkok



American David Mayer has turned a money-losing karaoke lounge in Siam Square into a pioneering design studio that may be a step ahead of the crowd back home – and he's loving every minute

■ Vincent MacIsaac
 The Nation

WHEN BOSTON-BASED architect David Mayer decided to travel in Asia, a friend suggested he take along a portfolio of his designs, including a few award-winners, "just in case".

That was five years ago. Now, the studio he set up in Bangkok has caught the eye of a few US firms looking for an Asian footprint. They are either considering a partnership with Whitespace or – in the case of one Boston-based firm – taking it over, Mayer says.

Although he declines to disclose Whitespace's revenues, he does say they doubled from 2005 to last year and are targeted to rise at least 30-50 per cent this year. His client list includes Apple, for whom he also designs iPod and computer accessories under his Parachute brand.

Whitespace has been expanding so swiftly that it has twice moved to a bigger office since opening two-and-a-half years ago. It now occupies a three-storey space behind the Lido Cinema in Siam Square – the springboard for teen fashion and pop trends.

It may not be Grade-A office space – it used to house a money-losing karaoke lounge – but the location is central, the rent is cheap, and the neighbourhood offers a jolt of adolescent creativity; the sort of consumer exuberance global brands are falling over themselves to be associated with.

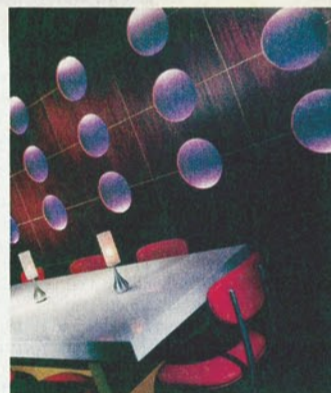
Mayer is probably the only architect in Siam Square. Certainly, he's the only Western one. How did he end up there?

"Ever since college, I wanted to be an expat," he explains in a meeting room on the third floor of Whitespace. He travelled extensively in Europe – especially England and Italy, where he studied for three months – but when he arrived in Bangkok, he was immediately hooked.

"It was like coming to another planet," he recalls. "It was so radically different. Just walking down the street was an adventure."

He had had a very different reaction to Japan. "I wrote off Japan because of the cost and the language barrier," he explains. He also felt it was a society that would be difficult to break into. There was a coldness he found off-putting but says this perception may have been the result of the language barrier and the short time he spent there.

To work in Tokyo, he would have had to do so as an employee of a large company. After 15 years of working for other people in the US, he wanted his



own business. "I like the level of challenge that comes from running the show," he says. "It's my personality type."

Architecture is a protected profession in Thailand, but it is possible for a foreign architect to make a living here. They can design interiors, supervise the work of Thai architects designing buildings or design buildings outside Thailand.

Mayer does all three. He says Thais are keen to work with Western architects. "It's definitely an advantage [to be Western]," he is quick to admit. "Just by being a Westerner you automatically get a kind of credibility that a perfectly capable Thai architect may not get. Hopefully, we deliver."

His fees are much higher than those most of his Thai counterparts charge. "Whitespace can't compete with local architects [in terms of price], but we don't want to," he says. He competes by offering a much

higher level of service. "The most important thing I try to deliver to the client is reliability. I stick to the project till the end, working side by side with the client as his advocate."

He recalls a friend's experience with an architect here – "The guy handed him the drawings and he never saw him again" – to describe the opposite of the kind of service he offers.

Mayer's fees may be high in Thailand, but for his US clients they are a bargain. About half of his clients are in the US. His studio works with several firms there in a relationship in which it does most of the design work while the clients are handled stateside.

Whitespace also has residential and retail projects in China.

Here, it designed Apple's Thai headquarters and rebranded its Apple Centre into the iStudio prototype. It's now providing Apple with a conceptual study for a redesign of the library at the Rajamangala University of

Technology Thanyaburi. The idea is to come up with a design that better harnesses technology as a research tool. A similar redesign for Chiang Mai University's media centre is in the pipeline.

Whitespace is also redesigning Plato's retail showroom at Siam Paragon as well as its commercial furniture showroom on Silom. In Pattaya, it's behind the renovation of the Serene Hotel.

Mayer notes two factors that make it lucrative for him to be an architect here: proximity to China and India; and access to "great talent at a lower cost".

Outsourcing is occurring at the largest architectural firms in the US, though Mayer says this has been until recently a "hush-hush topic no one wanted to talk about".

The bigger firms are having a lot of their construction and engineering drawings done in India, he says. They are looking 20 years ahead

and beginning to prepare for the arrival of low-cost rivals from Asia, he says. They will be holding a conference at Harvard University next month on outsourcing, and Mayer will be attending, though he's already a step ahead of them.

"Thailand has an incredible amount of creative talent, maybe some of the best in Asia," Mayer says.

Although he finds contemporary architecture here "weak", he uses adjectives like "fantastic" and "world class" to describe Thai interior design, fashion and advertising.

He's enthusiastic, too, about Bangkok as a city. Bangkok feels like it's alive, he explains. "It's really random, disorganised and disorderly, and that's charming," he says. By comparison, Boston or Los Angeles feels "synthetic", because of their unbridled zoning laws and regulations. Even canopies require their own set of restrictions, he points out.

Thailand's university system, however, fails to pass Mayer's grade. He spent his first two years here teaching at a university.

"My experience has been that the students don't seem to be as serious as those in the West," he says, pointing out that they don't take summer jobs.

"I'd love to hire student interns, but I can't find them, because the school years are not a time for work."

But work is not all that Whitespace is focused on either. Late last year, it opened a gallery on its first floor. "I wanted to give something back to Thailand and participate in the creative scene here," he says.

It was also a clever move for a studio that aims to be hip. The gallery's first opening drew a crowd that filled all three floors of Whitespace and spilled out into the corridors of the Lido Building.

Mayer may, once again, have to find a bigger space.