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STUDIO EMPIRE

After decades of designing interiors for top hotels in China and India, HBA expands into the middle market with its new division, Studio.

WORDS JUSTIN ZHUANG & MELINDA WILLIAMS

Budget-conscious businessmen in China and India's hospitality industry may have long stepped into The Ritz-Carlton Beijing or The Crowne Plaza Gurgaon and marvelled at their interiors, wondering if they would ever be able to afford such premium design. Both hotels – among many others – were fitted-out by multinational design consultancy Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA), which has 13 offices around the world, including Dubai, London, San Francisco, Tokyo and Singapore. Renowned as a premium brand with a portfolio of opulent interiors for blue-chip clients, HBA recently made a move to set up a specialised division – Studio – to cater to those hopeful budget-conscious businessmen.

Launched last year in Shanghai and New Delhi, Studio is an interior design company that caters to what HBA believes to be a fast growing segment in India and China. Unlike HBA's regular five-star luxury clients, Studio aims to serve the two- and three- star market, working on domestic projects like small to medium-sized hotels, show flats and restaurants. Its key to remaining affordable is a focus on the original design work, leaving its clients to source materials that suit their budget, explains Studio Shanghai's head, Cathy Wang. To ensure the final interior stays true to its design, Studio gives its clients guidelines and recommendations as to what kind of materials to use, and also monitors construction.

Another means of staying affordable is having both its offices staffed locally. This gives Studio much lower overheads than HBA, and also helps overcome issues such as working in the local language. Clients can also pay in local currency, avoiding ever-fluctuating dollar costs. For Studio Shanghai, being in China is particularly cost-effective. "A large advantage for Studio Shanghai that

(PREVIOUS PAGE) Trendy kebab house, Kebab Khan by the New Delhi Studio HBA.

(CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) The interior of Kebab Khan is a contemporary interpretation of royal palace dining; Studio HBA designed the interior of Lighthouse 13, a boutique lounge bar and restaurant in New Delhi.



contributes to being able to work and stay within lower budgets on projects, is that all materials, of a superb quality, can be sourced from within China," says Wang. For one of their recently completed projects, a chic-Chinese restaurant in Ningbo, Studio was able to recommend its clients to use material manufacturers in China itself.

But going local is not all about keeping costs low. Studio's locally-assembled team under HBA's direction can also provide solutions that integrate local understanding of the market's culture with global design principles, says HBA's Singapore-based principal Ian Carr. "Studio is about providing design in China, by China, with HBA DNA. The same holds true for Studio in India."

Indeed, even though Studio is catering to those with small budgets, it will not come at the expense of the quality that HBA provides top-tier clients, insists Carr. "Studio designers are originally HBA-trained employees that are transitioned into Studio staff," he says. The head of Studio Shanghai, Wang, has 13 years of experience working on hospitality projects in Canada and China, while the New Delhi office



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Pan-Asian restaurant Zazen; The interior of Zazen uses a simple palette of materials, layering of objects and filtering of views; Fu Di Chinese restaurant; Nantong show flat.



is headed by Rahul Shankwalker, who first joined HBA as a design director in 2007, after spending 12 years working in Australia, Singapore and India. Furthermore, even though Studio is run independent of HBA, Carr says HBA principals still oversee the quality of the work output.

In its first year, Studio has been positively received in both markets, says Carr. The New Delhi branch has completed several restaurant projects, including the pan-Asian Zazen and the nightclub bar Light House 13. Studio Shanghai has also gone on to do projects in Ningbo and Shenzhen. Through Studio, HBA has extended its designs into new ground for what it considers to be mature markets. According to Carr, both the Chinese and Indian markets boast stronger hospitality markets

than the United States combined, especially China. But, while HBA has expanded into the middle-tier market with Studio, it does not see the new company as a cheap solution to entice clients to eventually transit to its premium brand. "In fact it is the contrary, Studio provides a solution for top-tier developers who want to maintain high-quality standards in their two- and three-star projects which could not afford the premium of HBA," says Carr. "Studio is a permanent fixture."

For now, HBA has no plans to open more Studio offices. But going by the decades that the 47-year-old consultancy has provided interior design consultancy for top clients around the world, we won't be surprised if this is a model that's too big for India and China alone. studiohba.com