

PEOPLE

Katrin Figge speaks to a global architect with an inexplicable love for all things Asia

Diego Gronda's 'Holistic' Approach To Architecture

One of the most luxurious and exclusive cinemas the Southeast Asian region has to offer, Embassy Diplomat Screens, recently opened its doors in Bangkok to wow movie buffs with its unique combination of high-end hospitality and intriguing design, providing an experience to remember. Responsible for the cinematic phenomenon is the Madrid-based Rockwell Group Europe led by managing and creative director Diego Gronda, who has worked on distinguished projects all over the world, including the W Paris-Opera and Le Meridien Oran hotels, as well as numerous restaurants.

Gronda spoke to the Jakarta Globe about his love for Asia, the Embassy Diplomat Screens project and what it means to be a "global designer."

You studied architecture at the University of Buenos Aires. When did you first become interested in the subject?

I grew up in a family of civil engineers, with a father who used to design and build his own towers in Buenos Aires. So since I was a little boy, I was surrounded by plans, drawings, and sketches. I designed my first house when I was about five or six years old — probably not a masterpiece, but I already had it in my blood.

I followed design through an engineering point of view until I visited an exhibition on the work of Frank Lloyd Wright in New York, only six months before I was supposed to start engineering school. I completely fell in love with his renderings. My father helped me see... I was really passionate about the design of architecture... So just before starting university, I made the somewhat impulsive decision to change to architecture. It was clear after a few months that this was indeed what made me tick. I finished my architecture degree at the top of the class and won an anonymous competition to design the Buenos Aires headquarters for the IFC, part of the World Bank Group, when I was 22 years old.

You have worked on many projects in Asia. How did you first become involved in the region?

Since I was a kid growing up in Buenos Aires, I have been fascinated by Asia; I was drawn to Chinese history and literature. I haven't been able to figure out why, as we had no family connection to Asia. I moved to New York to pursue my masters degree in Architecture, then I worked for the Chinese interior designer, Tony Chi and Associates — so it was destiny for me to work in Asia one day.

My first trip to China was in 1994 as design director for Tony Chi. I was soon involved with projects for major hotels across Asia and Southeast Asia, and working in Thailand, Japan and Australia.

In 2000, when I joined Rockwell in New York as principal and creative director, my expertise was very much based on Asia and the Middle East. The projects I

brought in during my first year... were almost all located in Asia. I continued that legacy when I set up Rockwell's European headquarters in Madrid in 2005.

Is there a certain country or region that you would love to work in?

Everyone dreams about certain places they haven't been to, but the truth is, I am fascinated with any new country and any new culture I can get to know, and I'd love to work anywhere I haven't done so yet.

My profession has given me the opportunity... to work with people of very different backgrounds, and on projects of great programmatic range. In visiting all these foreign places, I have continued to learn things about my own background, which has been very rewarding. Having worked in cities such as Buenos Aires, Beirut, Doha, Mumbai and Shanghai, often at the same time, has also given me a cosmopolitan perspective.

Perhaps the most important part of our success in Asia and the Middle East is a true love for, and openness towards, things that are different from Western culture. It is an intriguing process; trying to understand how and why people behave the way they do, and to respond to their needs and preferences in designing new experiences, whether it's a luxury hotel or a restaurant or cultural project.

The Embassy Diplomat Screens project seems slightly different than your previous work. Could you share your experience on this particular venture?

Embassy Diplomat Screens is a special type of entertainment venue — part exclusive club, part state-of-the-art cinema. It was a very interesting project, perhaps one of my favorites, because it came with a program that I don't think exists.

We were asked to do a private screening room at the top of a very luxurious new shopping mall in the center of Bangkok. The original idea was to create a private membership movie club that would not be open to the general public. The concept evolved and the venue is now accessible to the public, but it retained that highly exclusive character. It's not the first time that we have brought lessons from our work in high-end hospitality to entertainment. In this particular case, however, we were asked to design an entertainment venue at the residential scale, and this really appealed to me.

We applied numerous concepts from high-end hospitality and residential design to transform the cinema experience. Our goal was to create a very personal and customized experience so we imagined this venue to be the private screening room of an international film star — let's say George Clooney — who wants to invite his friends to his own house to watch a movie together and to socialize. Based on this concept, we developed five individual screening rooms, ranging in size between 30 and 50 seats, that have a very residential look and feel, all the way down to the styling and the objects on display.

You'll find picture frames, books, and lampshades; elements that usually you



Clockwise from top left: Diego Gronda, managing and creative director of Rockwell Group Europe; The Embassy Diplomat Screens in Bangkok; The W Paris-Opera hotel; The Yellow Tail Sushi Bar in Bangkok.

Photos courtesy of Owen Raggett and Starwood Hotels & Resorts

don't see in a commercial environment. The main lounge is reminiscent of an elegant and cozy living room with a large fireplace. The venue is located on the former site of the British embassy, so our design is a modern interpretation of a prestigious British gentlemen's club.

The VIP section has its own lounge and a special screening room with different viewing areas and luxurious seating options for about 30 people. It offers a lot of flexibility. Guests can choose among "home theater" style seating with large couches for families, a daybed or love seat for couples, or a massage table for extra relaxation. Each seating area has its own private mini bar. The VIP cinema also gives access to a wine club — customers can continue to watch a movie via headphones from behind a large glass window while they enjoy a drink from the bar — and there's a dance floor that can be used for private events.

Rockwell Group Europe is based in Madrid, but you work on projects all over the world. Do you see yourself as a 'global' designer? What does that mean to you?

I travel extensively, especially as we have quite a bit of new work in China and the Middle East. So it's true that our work spans the globe, but our design solutions [emerge from] the different circumstances of each project.

We would never tackle a hotel in Jakarta, in Doha, and in Changsha the same way. Each of our projects is rooted in a specific geographic and cultural context and represents a singular response to attributes of landscape, climate, and local ways of life.

There is a distinctive approach to our work around the world, which stems from a holistic notion of design where

people's habits and preferences, a client's goals and a project's geographic and cultural context inform a unique and fitting concept. I like the analogy of the tailor who makes a suit to measure.

I'm of Italian origin, was born in Buenos Aires, spent my formative years in New York, have been working in Asia and on other continents, and now live in Spain. I have not one, but many identities and, similarly, there's no one cultural root that conditions our design approach. We start each project with a blank canvas.

When you work with a client, how much of your own vision goes into the final product?

From initial research to a project's completion, we engage in a formal process of collaboration with our clients.

One of the most satisfying moments for me is to celebrate an opening by walking the space with the owner and operator and, looking at the details, not knowing who actually came up with this or that idea. Lines can get very blurred when the designer, owner, and operator of a project work hand in hand, but those are the projects that often succeed the most.

For us it's not about surprising or challenging a client but really about working together to create design solutions that respond to the needs and preferences of a client's guests and customers while optimizing day-to-day business operations and enhancing a project's profitability.

Had you been to Indonesia before? Would you consider a project here?

I spent my honeymoon in Indonesia. We went to Bali, [the Borobudur] and Jakarta. I haven't yet had the opportunity to work on a project here and it's indeed something I would like to do. I would enjoy getting to know Indonesia better.