

# Uprooting the Roots

## Firms Find Inspiration to Tackle Unfamiliar Projects

BY KELLY HUSHIN

In most professional industries — design included — diversity is a welcomed word. It denotes risk taking. It conveys experience. It means expertise. But the interpretation of diversity and what it means in the design world can change at a moment's notice. Suddenly the idea of diving into uncharted waters has become a red flag for some companies, the idea being: stick to what's familiar, it's a guaranteed paycheck. Then there are others who refuse

to let a down economy cramp their style — who welcome the idea of an expanded reach into new markets.

The following designers understand how to draw from their areas of specialty to influence potential hospitality projects. Whether those projects get completed is TBD, but they are on the right track and give inspiration to anyone looking either to land their first hospitality project or to bulk up an already meaty portfolio.

### Building on Established Bulk — CBT

Celebrating its 40th anniversary, CBT in Boston is taking cues from its design and architecture work in urban planning, corporate, mixed-use and academic environments to plant roots in the hospitality design community. "Our work has been recognized for how distinctive it is for our clients and how functional it is as well," said Lois Godell, principal and director of interior design. "We've seen this as an easy crossover into hospitality because it's about first impression and branding as well as how people move through a space. Do they have what they need? Is it enjoyable to be in?"

According to Kathy McMahon, the director of business development, CBT's specialty is currently in large, mixed-use urban projects, from soup to nuts. On the interiors side, Godell said that the history of the firm has been in corporate design. "The shift in corporate has given us the ability to make that transition into hospitality," she said. To start, the firm is doing work in South East Asia in both the residential and hospitality arenas. What really put CBT on the hospitality map was the Indigo Hotel. "We are making great strides in the development of that brand," said McMahon. The firm's history also includes work with the Four Seasons and the Ritz. CBT had a call the day of this interview from a potential client in Boston who was looking at a 100-key hotel and wants them to go full steam ahead with the architecture and interiors. But no contracts have been signed.

"When you're talking about these turbulent times, that's what can happen," said Godell when asked if the project could be pulled. At the same time, she remains optimistic and remembers that the firm has the ability to see projects through when those papers are signed. "There can be a day when you get a call like this and the project has the energy behind it to go full steam ahead and we're fortunate to be able to do that."

Top: Kathy McMahon; Bottom Right: CBT's architecture and interior design for a residential mixed-use property in Hartford, CT



## Product as a Springboard — Cheng Design

Skillfully designed hospitality environments capitalize on their most striking pieces of furniture, art, lighting — anything that people won't soon forget. It is from these pieces that an atmosphere begins to grow. Fu-Tung Cheng of Cheng Design in Berkeley, Calif., believes in this sort of "back to basics" design ideology and it shows through in the products he designs, often using a presumably lackluster but surprisingly flexible material: concrete.

Cheng has worked for more than 20 years in product and residential design and has recently been recognized for his conceptual design of Teance, an authentic Asian tea lounge and shop in California.

At Teance, tea aficionados (or novices whose interests have been piqued) can browse through dozens of tea varieties in the front of the store before they sit at the bar in the back to enjoy some. The bar is made out of single cast concrete — which contains aggregates like porcelain, fossils and shells — in the shape of a traditional tea drinking vessel and is heated with electric wires so the whole concrete top is warm.

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— FU-TUNG CHENG

"It almost feels soft even though it's concrete," said Cheng. The walls in Teance are raked with plaster so that the whole length of the shop looks like a sand garden. It is this hands-on experience that Cheng says makes a designer capable of reinterpreting any sort of environment — hospitality included.

"The more you accumulate as a designer with hands-on knowledge and observing how things are done and getting your hands dirty, [the more] you can spin off those things with different results," said Cheng. He recently joined with Elkay, a healthcare sink manufacturer, to design a line of sinks for the company and was faced with the challenge of bringing aesthetic appeal to a tool which first has to be functional. "We started with concrete molds and realized that a sink is not just a hole in the counter," Cheng said. "You have to really get yourself in a different state of mind. This applies to all design. You have to come up with something that's not just gratuitously different and won't just be trendy and thrown out next year."

Similarly, Cheng understands that when people visit

hospitality venues, there needs to be a level of practicality that is delivered with a flair and finesse for what the customer demands. "What I see happening in the design world is that when people go to a hotel like a resort in Bali, for instance, [they] come back from those vacations and say, 'That's what I want. I want my bathroom to have that feeling,'" said Cheng. "More and more designers are being exposed to the reverse demand. People have acquired more and their standards of what is acceptable are very much influenced by their experiences abroad."

To find a balance, Cheng said designers must look within and re-visit "the core of really good design." He calls design the "software of our industry" because (as he says), "consumers do not care about the hardware and how something is put together, they care about how it looks and feels."

**Inset Photo Above: Fu-Tung Cheng; Right: Interior of Cheng's Teance, which could become a franchise**

