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When the world's your niche: Toronto's International Design Firms do big business

PAUL GALLANT | WEDNESDAY, JUNE 08, 2011



DARIUS MOSUN OF SOHEIL MOSUN LTD. - VOULA MONOHOULIAS

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"We're in the business of designing and making things that rock star architects and very discerning and demanding owners dream up. And when people are faced with a financial crisis, that's the first thing that dries up," says SML chair and CEO Darius Mosun, son of Soheil and Brigitte Mosun who founded the company in 1973. (His brother Cyrus is vice chair.) "It was a struggle, but we learn the most about ourselves and our company when we're under stress."

The company has produced huge projects like the translucent alabaster and cast-glass sails for a Baha'i temple in

Wanting something astonishing for a historic New York location, jeweller Tiffany & Co. hired [Yabu Pushelberg](#) to reinvent a neglected 11,000-square-foot space. The famed Toronto architects, in turn, hired Toronto's [Soheil Mosun Limited](#) to pump up the wow factor. That Soheil Mosun Limited did, designing and manufacturing stainless steel framing with custom finishes, dramatic modernist glass partition walls and a striking glass and steel elevator shaft.

The store won rave reviews when it opened across from the New York Stock Exchange in October 2007, but just few months later, Wall Street and financial markets around the world were in tatters. The kinds of clients who can afford such luxurious interiors were forced to rethink their game plans -- and so was Soheil Mosun Limited.

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The long view: Frances Lankin co-chairs a massive review of Ontario's social support structure

Launched in January 2010, the Ontario Social Assistance Review Committee is taking a penetrating look at the province's support structures, and the implications for Toronto are big, says former United Way CEO, Frances Lankin.

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Santiago, Chile, and the fences and gates that surround the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia, as well as smaller icons like the Giller Award and the Wheel of Conscience memorial in Halifax for the Canadian Jewish Congress. When the financial crisis hit, rather than downsize or become a broader-based firm chasing lower-hanging fruit, the company spent the that time consolidating its

strengths. They spent \$100,000 on research and development on their finishes and manufacturing techniques. The firm has become even more specialized and high-end -- and much harder to imitate.

"The market we're in resists copycats and labour dumping for a long time," says Mosun.

A tight focus in an exclusive market, combined with impossible-to-duplicate ideas and execution. These are strategies that have helped several Toronto architectural design firms attract prestigious clients worldwide. Taking advantage of the city's design talent pool and globally connected multicultural population, they've been able to become dominate players in highly specialized fields.

For Soheil Mosun Limited, for example, their family's roots in the Baha'i, Roman Catholic, Muslim and Jewish faiths have earned them a reputation for being respectful and serious about projects that have deeper religious and cultural meanings.

"Being Baha'i, a world religion that respects all other faiths, we're very approachable people, totally open-minded and trustworthy to people of varying background and ethnicities. We find ourselves having something genuinely in common with every customer we come into contact with," says Mosun.

Formed in 1987, [Reich+Petch](#) has worked in more than 24 countries. Exhibition spaces and galleries have become their main calling card, and they've designed several spaces for the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., including the human origins, butterfly and live animal galleries, as well as the King Abdul Aziz Historical Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

"There are no cookie-cutter projects in what we do," says founding principal Tony Reich. "Whether it's a historical site or a geological site or that particular institution or location has particular requirements, it's a fantastic field because it's always a challenge."

Reich came to Canada from the U.K. as a student and stayed on. Early in his career, he saw an ad from the [Royal Ontario Museum](#) looking for freelance designers, which led to his big break., working on the ROM's much-respected birds and Egypt and Nubia galleries. Partly due to Canada's two world exhibitions ([Montreal](#) in 1967, [Vancouver](#)) in 1986, Reich says the country has been a magnet for exhibition design talent. As galleries increasingly demand multimedia and technology-driven exhibits to educate and delight attendees, Toronto's reputation as a media incubator is also a definite plus.

"When we do international projects, we can find those specialized resources here pretty easily," says Reich.

[Moss & Lam](#), also founded in 1987, have made their name internationally producing custom-designed, handcrafted interiors that turn public and commercial spaces into artworks. Whether it's their fossilized-looking wall in Times Square's W Hotel, wire sculpture for Printemps department store in Paris



or a seven-storey mobile of metal and crystals in Seoul, the company defined itself by its unique approach to texture, patterns and shapes. Drawing many of their ideas from nature, their work travels well.

"Our ideas are basic," says principal Edward Lam. "People from different countries tend to want similar things. We might position the piece where it reflects the site-specifics of it, but we start with something very universal."

After a start as a faux finishes business that generally avoided the cheesiness of fake marble and imitation Tuscan villas, the company slowly started pushing the limits of what paints and materials would do, turning themselves into something of a "giant prototype studio," says Lam.

"We create stuff in that pocket where you don't have to worry about whether you're an artist or a designer," "We grappled with that for a while but we're quite comfortable that we can sit in that fuzzy area where we're both."

Although the economic downturn affected Moss & Lam's bottom line -- especially the luxury hotel business in the U.S. -- Lam says it also gave the firm an opportunity to refocus.

"What we were doing that was purely revenue-generating disappeared, leaving us with the projects that were the most interesting," says Lam. "That was probably a good thing."

Paul Gallant is a Toronto-based freelance writer who lives in the emerging Brockton Triangle neighbourhood.

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