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Gambling on Sheer Talent

STORY BY BETTY ANN JORDAN

Reich and Petch are design's sure thing.

It's a busy Friday afternoon at the world's most visited museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. In the Africa gallery of the Behring Family Hall of Mammals, the rumble of thunder and a flash of lightning precede the rattling sound of falling rain. Visitors stand transfixed before a mounted giraffe, legs akimbo as it stoops to drink from a simulated Savanna waterhole. On a glass screen behind the creature, who is flanked by a pair of zebras and a rhino, there's a video projection of a herd of elephants lumbering through tall grass.

Up in Canada, in Gananoque, Ontario, at eleven in the morning the nautical-themed Thousand Islands Charity Casino is awash with the ping of the slot machines punctuated by periodic alarm bells signaling another win. Half-awake slots players are islands inundated by waves of ambient noise, anchored by an aural undercurrent of what sounds like middle C being played over and over on a toy piano. In Oscar's dining room, named after the chef who invented Thousand Islands dressing, a wall is spangled with glowing talismanic names; "Heart Island," "Cherry Island" and the shivery "Dark Island".

The link between these disparate experiences is that they have been superbly stage-managed by Reich+Petch Design International of Toronto. Since the firm's formation in 1987, a polyglot team of architects, interior, museum, industrial and exhibit designers, plus facility planners and graphic artists (currently a core group of 25 people) has produced scores of effective, highly popular environments that run a very large gamut. On the museum design A-list, their educational attractions are the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the Singapore Philatelic Museum, the Art Gallery of Windsor and the Royal Ontario Museum's galleries for Egypt/Nubia, Birds and South Asian Art. The company has also become synonymous with gaming, with some 30 projects to its credit including the major Casino Niagara, Sault Ste. Marie Charity Casino and Woodbine Racetrack Slots.

Tony Reich and Whit Petch are experienced showmen. Reich's vast experience in exhibit design, as well as his charisma and flair for languages, ensures happy clients from Kiev to St. Kitts. Whit Petch, the casino over-



lord and in-house honcho, is a driver. He keeps production humming at break-neck speed, a requisite in the high-stakes worlds of gaming and attractions. Both trained as architects, Petch at the University of Toronto and Reich at the Leicester School of Architecture. There Reich was tutored by several members of the vanguard Archigram group who championed fluidity and changeability in design. But design was already bred in the bone. The precocious scion of a design family, he got a remarkably early start, working in his father's studio in Stratford on Avon. At the age of six, young Tony designed textiles for the children's area of a Danish cruise line, followed by ceramics, and by sixteen, he was helping to operate the family's private museum of model cars, now a 30,000-item collection on loan to the Coventry Museum of British Road Transport.

An aviation, military and sports enthusiast, Petch also cites models, model airplanes to be precise, as being seminal. To this day, when he has a week off, he likes to polish off a model. As project head for the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum and the Saqr Al-Jazira Museum of Aviation, he was gratified to be showcasing the real things.

Reich + Petch (R+P) first established itself internationally when it designed the hugely popular Ontario exhibit for the Canada Pavilion at Expo 92 in Seville. Canada was the first country to use hands-free virtual reality in the form of blue screens that enabled the viewer to interject herself into a film. "We're not so much technological inventors as good adapters," explains Reich. His firm had come across a company experimenting with the technology, using it for ballet, to alter the movement of the body. Asking themselves how the technology might be deployed to engage upwards of 500 people every 15 minutes, they devised a snow-ball fight, with a virtual pile of snowballs and virtual splats on the face. Against the backdrop of a Canadian forest, one could also pat a moose or hold a virtual bird in your hand. Similarly there was a piano key simulation that made it possible to interact with Glenn Gould's compositions. "Our visitors are our ultimate clients," Reich asserts. Long line-ups are evidently their way of voting with their feet.

The federal government took notice and awarded R+P the contract for Canada's pavilion at Expo 93, Taejon, Korea, everything right down to uniforms, graphics and design guidelines. Their next big break came when



OPENING PAGE: Behring Exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Royal Ontario Museum's Ondaatje South Asia Gallery; Lake Superior Pavilion; Hong Kong Heritage Museum in Sha Tin.

they became part of the team assembled by Moriyama Teshima Architects that won the pivotal contract for the Saudi Arabian National Museum. Subsequently R+P designed exhibits for the King Abdul Aziz Historical Foundation and interiors for the first king Aziz's Murrabba Palace in the same cultural complex. The Saudi Arabian National Air Force Museum was yet another project linked to the 1999 nation-wide Arabian celebration of 100 years of Saud rule. "It was a coup for Canada to have been so involved in the cultural core of the capital, in projects showcasing national treasures that will be there for a very long time," Reich says.

The firm's Middle and Far Eastern projects have left Reich with indelible memories of travelling for several weeks in scorching heat in remote desert and mountain areas, enjoying privileged access to marvellous archaeological sites and ruins, the better to appreciate their significance. Similarly while working for

the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in Sha Tin, he relished behind the scenes access to the Cantonese Opera, while researching a Bamboo Theatre gallery. What did he learn about the two cultures? "Arabs like big open spaces and Hong Kong Chinese like small cramped spaces," he says with a grin.

One of R+P's most prestigious jobs to date, the Smithsonian Institution's 24-million dollar National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), opened in November 2003. Airy and light-filled, it's housed in a restored neo-classical wing, with mounted mammal specimens animated by experiential sound and image components. Regarded as an innovative addition to the Smithsonian, in the Far North interactive discovery zone visitors can touch what is described as "the cold body of a hibernating squirrel," or a patch of seal blubber. "Attention to elegant detail is the way you show respect for nature," says Robert Sullivan, the NMNH's associate director.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Royal Ontario Museum's Egypt/Nubia Gallery, Birds and South Asian Art; Waterfall at Casino Niagara; Saudi Arabian National Museum.

Gaming is a booming international business, with charity gaming facilities sprouting up especially in countries with depressed economies. As Whit Petch explains, "There's so much money involved, once the license has been approved, the race is on. It's like driving a careening car, barely in control." R+P got into gaming as a result of their work on the Art Gallery of Windsor, which decamped temporarily from its historic brewery building to a nearby shopping mall, to make way for the newly approved Windsor Casino which squatted on the gallery's former premises while its purpose-built facility was under construction. Rather than return to it, the Windsor Art Gallery eventually opted to raze the old building and erect a new one designed by R+P with Moffat Kinoshita Architects. Although it was completed most expeditiously, that project won awards from the Ontario Association of Architects and the Ontario March of Dimes. The interaction with lottery officials was so positive, that R+P subsequently submitted a successful bid on the Casino Niagara's 150 million dollar renovation and addition to a defunct shopping mall in Niagara Falls. With a fast-track schedule from inception to opening night of eight months, the time-line was hair-raising.

This benchmark project earned Petch the sobriquet Terminator. "We may never again encounter the right scale, right mix of clients and staff and consultants to make a project on the scale of Casino Niagara," reminisces Petch. That said, the firm has been involved with upwards of 30 gaming projects in the whirlwind years since Niagara opened in 1996 and he sees a bright future in comparable strategic alliances in countries such as the U.K.

Gaming is its own story. "Casinos are more about process than design," says Petch. "We have a creative approach to the speed and level of quality that's expected, but these projects are going so fast!" Talent being a given, the Ontario Lottery Corporation has seen firsthand what R+P can do. David Maddocks recalls the dizzy pace of Casino Niagara: "Whit and Tony complement each other." He laughs when he remembers the "Just Get It Done" stickers contractors wore on their hard hats. ("Go Hard or Go Home" was considered a little too raucy). Themed attractions not unlike museums, gaming facilities must also have the aura of a must-see destination. The catch is that they operate 24/7 and materials must be singularly durable to withstand incredibly high traffic. The idea is to appeal in an authentic way to locals' sense of place,

including history and geography, while glamming up that image and lore for tourists. A million people a month come to Casino Niagara, some just to look, others to lose track of time as they gamble under the domed sky feature that simulates the changing qualities of a sky over 24 hours from midnight to high noon. Naturally there is a interior waterfall.

Among the firm's secret weapons is a chameleon-like ability to reflect the culture of the host country, as opposed to parachuting a western museum onto foreign soil. Being based in multicultural Toronto has also given them the edge, making it relatively straightforward to find an Egyptian or an Arabic graphic designer or somebody in-house who speaks Cantonese, as well as local type houses that can produce Arabic type. Reich says, "We tend to think more inside out than most architects, and a number of people in our office have a deep understanding of museum visitor activity." Among them, Steve Petri was former chief designer and project manager for the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) while graphic designer Michael Peters, also a ROM alumnus, has been involved with scores of international museums and "visitor-centred" attractions.

What's up next? Having just finished a creativity attraction at Artworks at the Lowry, in Salford Quays, UK, the National Portrait Gallery in Ottawa is looming large. Archives Canada is the client and R+P are working with Stephen Teeple Architects to retrofit an existing building to create, not so much a gallery of personalities and historic figures, as Reich puts it, but rather a venue that relates to all Canadians. The idea is to have some paintings of famous people by ordinary Canadians and some paintings of ordinary people including children (and animals) by famous painters. Reich is speaking about the National Portrait Gallery but his comments relate to their broader enterprise: "We want it to be interactive so people can feel that they have choices and find stories themselves." When push comes to shove R+P don't believe in spoon-feeding.

Meanwhile, in downtown Riyadh, night approaches as visitors to the Saudi Arabian National Museum hurry through an arcade of pointed arches in search of a few final archaeological wonders. Voices come to a halt as shafts of light from the ceiling turn an immense gilt door, embossed with exquisite calligraphic patterns, into a gleaming vision of other-worldly beauty. The moment, orchestrated by talented people living half a world away, conveys the essence of this place, this country, this culture. It belongs here and nowhere else. ♣



Over 25 years, we have evolved our viewpoint about design to create extraordinary moments and opportunities for people to have experiences that change their understanding and perspective of the world they live in.

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