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MACKAY | WONG STRATEGIC DESIGN
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# MACKAY|WONG STRATEGIC DESIGN

## Building hospitality experiences one personality at a time

by Luigi Benetton
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**Few design firms stay as closely associated with their inaugural project as Toronto's Mackay|Wong Strategic Design.**

In the 90s, the firm designed the interior of Wayne Gretzky's eponymous Toronto restaurant. The City of Toronto would soon accommodate the Great One's request to rename the street Blue Jays Way and to confer the street number – what else? – 99 on his eatery.

To take on this work, Gordon Mackay and Ron Wong had to express their intentions to then-employer, the Pete and Marty's restaurant chain. After the resulting split, the pair approached Gretzky's partners, the Bitove family ("cap in hand," according to Mackay) asking for office space. The Bitoves offered space above the future Wayne Gretzky's and they've been growing at the iconic address ever since.

The road for both designers to the work address up the street from the Rogers Centre proved circuitous and not entirely foreseeable. Wong, from Winnipeg, met Mackay, who hails from New Brunswick, soon after graduation from what was then the Technical University of Nova Scotia (now part of Dalhousie University). Both started in different areas of study – Mackay in fine art, Wong in engineering – before they reset their educational sights on architecture.

The job market that welcomed them upon graduation resembled the one that awaits today's graduates. "Architects who had been in practice for 20 years were being shown the door," Mackay recalls.

"That recession was a formative experience," he says. Once they formed the firm, the twosome sought work in Toronto, then the rest of Canada, and are now engaged in international projects.

"We have practiced in a conservative way, careful never to completely leave our backyard. We learned early on that this business is well-served by maintaining and building relationships that can move beyond one project," says Mackay. "You don't turn and burn."

The first rung on Mackay's and Wong's career ladder materialized when they were hired as in-house designers for the then-expanding Pete and Marty's restaurant chain.

"We worked with the chef, the accountant, the construction manager – everybody," Mackay says. "We learned the hospitality business from the inside."

After several years, the duo learned of the design competition for Gretzky's forthcoming restaurant. "We came in with a passionate pitch about the Gretzky brand for the Bitoves," says Mackay, describing the elements that customers would want in Wayne's place. Mackay and Wong scored the project "and that was the beginning of Mackay|Wong," Mackay says. "It was the first time we dug into a personality and built a hospitality experience around it."

Between other Bitove properties and work from other clients, the firm found its feet. Work with the Hard Rock and Rainforest Café brands helped hone the partners' skills in the "eatertainment" niche. "We began to understand that restaurants can produce immersive experiences that sell products," Mackay asserts. Their boardroom speeches moved from style and esthetics towards branding.

Their credibility in the food and beverage industry led to different yet related types of work, including hotels, gaming brands, airports and arenas. "It wasn't strategic by any means," Mackay admits, "but we developed a great skill set."

These skills served them well when they took on the Boiler House Restaurant, the first project in Toronto's Distillery District. Derelict and out of code, this cluster of grand old buildings sat largely ignored east of downtown Toronto, a place "no restaurateur would touch," Mackay recalls.

When Mackay|Wong got the call and visited the space, "we recognized it as a diamond in the rough," Mackay continues. "This was serious architecture, where we looked at the history, the fabric of the city. It was a very earnest project."

Businesswise, the area needed a destination restaurant, designed on a shoestring, that would spark retail and other activity. In collaboration with Eagar + Co. Design, Mackay|Wong set to work, recycling the wood and metal for the restaurant from surrounding racking houses, turning it into tabletops, bar tops, display pieces and so forth. The ensuing media recognition surprised Mackay, and the Boiler House won an ARIDO Project of the Year award the year after it was built.

The foundation of Mackay|Wong's creativity comes in part from the different skill sets the partners brought in as they built their company up to its current staff of 26. Interior designers work with graphic designers, architects and product designers. "It leads to a holistic approach to problem-solving," Mackay explains.

One sees both Mackay and Wong getting their apples not from a fruit stand but directly from the tree, caring for the orchard along the way. Wong volunteers at Sheridan College, west of Toronto, while Mackay participates in year-end project reviews as a guest critic at downtown Toronto's Ryerson University. "They love hearing about their work from a business perspective," Mackay says of the students. "It becomes more real to them."

"Both faculties know about us and they're turning out terrific graduates."

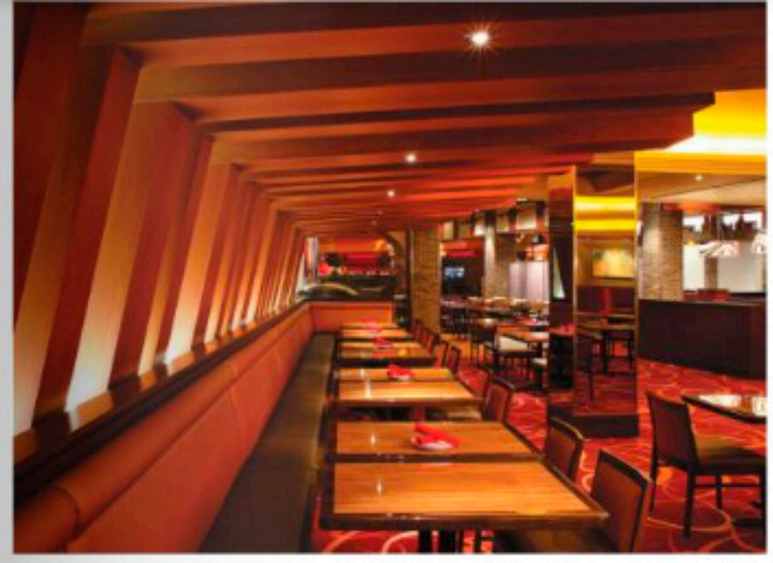
A variety of work draws recruits and keeps them interested, while the transparent nature of the firm's operations helps to earn their loyalty. "Everybody here knows what our year-end revenue targets are, our profit expectations," says Mackay. "We don't play our cards close to the vest."

"We think of the team here as a group of method actors," Mackay continues. "One day they'll work on a rebranding strategy for Radisson Hotels, a casino the next."

One casino project stands out: Casino Windsor's transformation to Caesar's Windsor, a half-billion dollar project involving WZMH Architects. Harrah's Entertainment Inc., the largest gaming company in the world and the project's operator, wanted to rebrand everything, with plans for international expansion. Mackay|Wong quickly realized that the existing Caesar's concept didn't travel well.

"Before this, the Caesar's brand could only be experienced in Las Vegas and Atlantic City," Mackay says. "It gave us the opportunity to build a brand that can travel."

One of Mackay|Wong's foci was the role of art within the facility. Facets from actual artwork, architectural gardens, the colour and material palettes and other elements gelled in the design cauldron for the largest gaming company in the world. "That was a huge step up for a staff of 26, half of which were dedicated to the project," Mackay says.



Clockwise from left: Boiler House Restaurant, Toronto; Artist Café – Caesars Windsor; and Cedar Grill, Toronto.

Closer to home, Mackay|Wong worked with WZMH Architects to design Great Blue Heron Casino, Canada's first LEED-Silver gaming facility for the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG).

"The OLG is a huge consumer of power in all its facilities," Mackay says of the client's interest in LEED. The firm also participated in a buildout of the OLG's Georgian Downs property that will attain LEED certification.

"Green is becoming less the exception to the rule," Mackay says. "It's now part of the everyday conversation with clients. It's going to become part of the DNA of our industry."

To traditional design firms, the Mackay|Wong modus operandi can seem messy. "We pour all our ideas into the same cauldron," Mackay explains, likening the firm to ad agencies more than traditional design firms. "We look at a situation from different vantage points, which makes the challenges our clients hand us more interesting."

All the depth, all the vantage points, all the opinions come to bear on our projects at the beginning to produce a "front-loaded" process instead of a more traditional, "orderly" approach where senior management handles the front end, molds a concept and starts a ball rolling down the internal tracks to various departments.

"Our work seeks to celebrate the complexity of the world," Mackay offers.

Hockey Canada and the International Ice Hockey Federation are probably happy to hear that, given their involvement in Vancouver next year. Mackay|Wong contributed to the design of the 80,000-square-foot pavilion that will serve players during the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. This structure will offer a home-away-from-home for players and their families as well as a place for Hockey Canada to entertain sponsors. Within the pavilion, the 25,000-square-foot MVP Square, sponsored by Molson, will feature Canadian entertainers.

The company's website reflects the firm's tighter focus on four categories, or "verticals" of work: restaurants, hotels, entertainment and brand identity. Brand identity, which will be recognized as an independent division ("It's getting a business plan and staff of its own," says Mackay.), will continue to develop collateral, logos, identities and so forth, all while supporting the other three divisions.

The cauldron metaphor also describes how Mackay and Wong manage their business – for now. "Everything, regardless of scale and complexity, gets thrown in together and we scurry around to handle it," Mackay says. "It's a reactionary approach, reflective of a maturing business that is getting organized around managing bigger opportunities."

The "four verticals" approach will help them develop greater expertise and better relationships, which the partners view as the foundation of future growth and success for the company. ■

