

- **Size** doesn't matter because the approach to an architecture project remains the same regardless of the scale
- **There** are many differences in the architecture industry in Europe and Asia



by
**Miguel Angel
Robles-Cardona**

I am an architect and an educationist and, until now, I have never had much (or any) interest in how to do business with architecture. However, my knowledge on the European context and my experience with the Asian market through my position with Veritas Design Group, pushes me, more than invites me, to know about how the architecture Industry works out of my screen.

West, East, North and South, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) play a great role in societies of all sizes.

With due exceptions to the rule, the majority of architecture companies in Europe tend to fit the definition of small (more than medium) enterprises.

On the other hand, many practices in Asia are usually at the upper range of the medium enterprise definition. A few of them, such as Veritas, exceed that number with more than 300 employees.

However, in architecture, it is still possible to read large companies as an addition of SMEs. A worldwide accepted definition considers small businesses or enterprises as those employing between 20 and 50 people. Medium-sized businesses, on the other hand, usually employ up to 200 or 250 people.

Asia vs Europe

Looking at the big picture, there are many differences in the architecture industry in Europe and Asia. The differences are not only in the day-to-day practice but especially in education.

All these differences have a clear, direct and unavoidable relation to the size of the projects and hence to the size of the companies.

However, despite the scenario, the approach to an architecture project and design remains the same regardless of the scale. A journey from general to specific, from overall to detail: size does not matter.

The different sizes of many of the projects currently happening in Asia and Europe seem to raise a few realities.

First of all, they raise the momentum in their respective economies: while Europe seems to be stuck, Asia is in the midst of a vertiginous development explosion, even though some regions are showing a certain slowdown.



In Asia, cities continue to grow rapidly. There are towers, big condominiums, new malls and airports everywhere

A matter of perspective

On the other hand, different sizes of architectural interventions in Europe and Asia seem to raise a feeling of completeness.

Demography in Europe is not changing, cities are not growing, "everything is there already". It is a matter of touching up here and there and keeping things as "nice" as possible.

Obviously, there is still some

room for certain impactful interventions. However, demography in Asia is explosive, hungry and demanding, cities grow and grow greatly. There are towers, big condominiums, new malls and airports everywhere.

Even architecture schools get us ready for the market we will be in. Despite some common bases, architecture schools in Spain

clearly insist on the education of comprehensive and independent professionals.

They should be capable of carrying the completeness of the architecture project, from the design concept to the provision of services, passing by the calculation of the structure, even when structures take a certain entity.

In contrast, architecture schools in Malaysia insist on purely the design aspect, know the scale and complexity of the projects approached. The structure of the industry will seldom set an architect in the role of calculating structures or services because it will be done by an external consultancy in coordination with the architectural design.

It will be the practice and, especially, the experience that will train architects in the most technical architectural matters. In Spain, it is assumed by default in fresh graduates.

Targeting the sun

A Spanish architect, Julio Cano Lasso (1920-1996), who I admire for both his buildings and writings, used to tell that the world hegemony seems to move following the movement of the sun: first Europe, then North America, now Asia. I wonder when Australia, Africa and South America will take their chances.

Every 1,000-mile trip starts with a single step. Every adult was a kid once. Every tree, a seed once. In the same vein, most of the world's largest companies were once SMEs.

For this reason, SMEs play a crucial role in the working and growth of the architecture industry.

Veritas Design Group has not always been a large company, however big the ambition, vision and perseverance of its founder David Hashim. There is a saying: To arrive at the moon,

you have to target the sun.

Even though the large Veritas design machine is composed of several small business units, all of them are themselves an SME. Each is a different specialised department arranged and sized to respond efficiently to its particular scope.

Micro-management

The pyramid of scope of work shows how the architecture project is managed: 1) The art of architecture serves cities, societies and environment; 2) The architecture project is tied to the client, who tries to respond and mirror the market; 3) The macro-complexity of the architecture project is micro-managed by the architecture firm (most likely an SME) under which the rest of consultancies or "scopes of work" are parked (most likely SMEs as well).

However, in reality, the boundaries of the blue are blurred. The scope covered by the architecture firm will depend on the particular project (and its size) as well as the size of the firm itself. This is how large architecture companies can be seen as an addition to specialised SMEs or a big SME.

In the end, a business does not need (should not wait) to become a large company to do the best it can do. "If you can't be a pine at the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley. Be the best little shrub on the side of the hill. Be a bush if you can't be a tree. If you can't be a highway, just be a trail. If you can't be the sun, be a star. For it isn't by size that you win or fail. Be the best of whatever you are."

So does size matter? For some things, it doesn't. **FocusM**

Miguel Angel Robles-Cardona is an associate architect with the Veritas Design Group



Menara TM is one of the many iconic buildings in Kuala Lumpur. The emphasis of architecture schools in Malaysia, unlike their European counterparts, is purely on design aspects