

TODAY'S WEATHER

CLOUDY
-1 °C
4 Day Forecast | Traffic

MARK YOUR CALENDARS! CAREER EXPO
 3 Unique Events in 1 location!
 Monday, March 3, 2008
 Holiday Inn on King, 370 King St. West, Toronto
 *Professional/General
 *Engineering/Technology
 *Healthcare
 Job Seekers needing more information: 877/842-3976 x17, resume@expoexpertsilc.com

Monday, February 25, 2008 | Today's Toronto Star

PHOTOS VIDEO COLUMNISTS BLOGS PODCASTS RSS MOBILE NEWSLETTERS ALERTS



Search thestar.com Search the Web
 Advanced Search | Full Text Article Archive

HOME NEWS COMMENT BUSINESS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT LIVING SCIENCE-TECH WHEELS.CA TRAVEL CLASSIFIEDS CAREERS

Today's Markets | Fund Centre | Fund Lookup | Portfolio Manager | Money 911 | Small Business | Investing

THINKING BIG

Thinking local, acting global

Toronto design firm Forrec has megaprojects around the world but is hardly known at home

Feb 25, 2008 04:30 AM

RITA TRICHUR
BUSINESS REPORTER

Forrec Ltd. is known in business circles as Toronto's best-kept secret. The entertainment design company, nestled in the heart of Liberty Village, is literally in the business of dreaming big and bringing those ideas to life.



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR
 Gordon Dorret, left, and Steven Rhys, senior shareholders of global entertainment design firm Forrec Ltd., at the company's Liberty Village office.

It has successfully affirmed the adage about the world being a canvas to the imagination by leaving its mark on entertainment attractions around the globe. Playing key roles in the design of mammoth projects like Universal Studios Florida, Legoland Deutschland and the Shanghai Science and Technology Museum, its canon of work also includes Canada's Wonderland and West Edmonton Mall.

Forrec already boasts a blue-chip client list and the distinction of being one of the world's top three design firms. But its executives concede the company is better known abroad than here at home.

"You are not famous until you leave Canada. We left Canada, we've made our name and now we'd like to come back," said president Gordon Dorrett. "We'd really like to do more work here ... I'd like to have an influence on the urban fabric of this city."

Whether Torontonians are aware of it or not, Forrec has already helped fashion the city's cultural landscape. It has worked on projects with the Toronto Zoo, Ontario Place, Royal Ontario Museum and produced the original conceptual work for the PenEquity Building at Dundas Square.

Forrec Q&A

Q. How much seed capital did you have when you launched your business and where did you obtain it?

It also has a deep-rooted history here. Established in the late 1950s as a landscape architectural firm called Richard Strong and Associates, the company has evolved through a number of name and partner changes.

Forrec emerged as an entertainment design company in 1983 and currently has 11 shareholders. Most of that group participated in a management buyout of the firm that occurred in two stages in 1998 and 2001. Dorrett and senior vice-president Steven Rhys are the company's two senior shareholders.

"That's probably one of our most frustrating things - it is as difficult for us to find work in Toronto as it is anywhere else," Dorrett said. "I can walk into an office in Korea and people immediately know what Forrec is and hold us in high esteem. We pitch on work like the Chicago (Navy) Pier and we can work on Chicago's waterfront, but we can't work on Toronto's waterfront."

The rancorous debate over the development of Toronto's waterfront has raged for decades and shows no signs of letting up. Earlier this month, the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corp. sparked a fresh bout of criticism after announcing that a proposal for a beach at the foot of Jarvis Street had won its most recent design competition.

While not specifically commenting on that idea, Dorrett said years of dithering have resulted in "missed opportunities" for the city. At the crux of the problem, he added, is a misguided fear of commercialism.

"We all know that the only thing that is going to drive this is a big injection of cash and it is not going to come from the city or the province or the federal government, it has got to come from privatization. And we're of the belief here that that is not a negative thing," Dorrett said. "There are so many wonderful opportunities that we've seen elsewhere that combine privatization and public and you end up with a winning product."

The starting point ought to be the combination of Ontario Place and the CNE grounds, which are among the biggest pieces of "under-developed" urban land on the continent, he said.

"It's sad. I mean, people would flock by the thousands to a San Antonio Riverwalk or a place like that where we can go and enjoy the waterfront," he said. "There are ways to make 'green' fabulous," he added, pointing to the resounding success garnered by Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, Denmark.

And while Toronto is just waiting for the next "big idea," it is located in a relatively small market compared to other parts of the world. Large-scale projects just don't pop up every day in Canada, said Rhys. "So we have to go where the fish are running."

That means about 90 per cent of Forrec's work is for clients outside of Canada, with the bulk in emerging markets such as China, India, Korea and Dubai. In addition to theme parks, the company designs water parks, entertainment centres, shopping centres, hospitality, casinos, cultural attractions and specializes in urban and resort planning.

Its current projects include Universal Studios Dubai, a \$2.2 billion (U.S.) project situated in the United Arab Emirates boomtown. Forrec is planning the project's landscape, architecture, interior and show design. It is a massive undertaking that has been completely adapted to respect "ethno-cultural" requirements, such as easy-to-access prayer rooms, he said.

"A lot of the emerging trends are emerging in the emerging markets," added Rhys. "The canvas is pretty clean there compared to back here in North America where we are saturated with a lot of entertainment opportunities."

The hottest trend right now is "multi-use" commercial developments. In India, for example, a shopping centre is no longer just about retail. It is a theme-based entertainment destination.

Forrec, itself, functions like a multi-disciplinary "think-tank" with its 100-person team of architects, interior designers, graphic designers, story tellers and creative illustrators collaborating on all projects. Moreover, its multicultural work force has been pivotal in serving its international client base.

And while Toronto is often considered "boring" compared to places like New York, Canadians have "the good fortune to be branded as having a certain level of integrity."

Said Dorrett: "Anybody can draw pretty pictures. But to draw a pretty picture and get it built and brought to life, that is the tough part."

Email story
 Print
 Choose text size
 Report typo or correction
 License this article
 BOOKMARK

Advertisement
CHECK OUT OUR GREAT FARES

 VIA Rail Canada
 A MORE HUMAN WAY TO TRAVEL
 CLICK HERE

MORE IN THE NEWS

- Extra \$1B for debt, roads
- IMF says Canadian economy slowing
- Black associate Radler goes to jail
- Loonie jumps back above parity
- Energy gives TSX a boost
- CRTC raises concerns about BCE takeover
- U.S. home sales keep tumbling
- \$19B Visa IPO could be record
- Athabasca uranium mine to cost \$435M
- Getty Images sold for \$2.1B

RECENT SPECIAL SECTIONS

- Best Employers for New Canadians
- Earth Hour
- RRSPs & Investing
- Living Yoga
- Diabetes
- Guide to Colleges and Universities
- Florida Travel
- Caribbean Travel

More Specials

Advertisement
 Talk to us about investing before the RSP deadline on February 29th.
 A fact sheet to help with RSP investing
 Talk to an investment professional
 BMO Mutual Funds
 What's next for you?

MOST POPULAR ON THESTAR.COM

- Most Read | Most Emailed
- Teen driver charged in passenger's death
 - Classless Leafs don't deserve Mats
 - Get shovel out - more snow's coming
 - 4 Oscars for Coens
 - Horoscopes for Monday, February 25

SPECIAL

Re-imagining books
 Last year, the Department of Canadian Heritage commissioned Turner-Briggs, a Vancouver-based market-analysis company, to study the ...

Damien Cox's The Spin
 Read Damien Cox's take on the Toronto sports scene here.

A big lift
 This reader was trying to shovel out her driveway and got some unexpected help.

More Specials

TheStar.com Corrections | Contact Webmaster | FAQ | RSS | Desi Life

Toronto Star About Us | Subscribe | Subscriber Self Services | Contact Us | News Releases | Star Internships | Careers at the Star

Advertise With Us Media Kit | Online Advertising | Print Advertising | Special Sections

Initiatives Santa Claus Fund | Fresh Air Fund | Classroom Connection

Torstar Sites toronto.com | ourfaves.com | Pages of the Past | Star Store & Photo Sales | New In Homes | More...

