

No holds barred...

Designing for function, as well as form, is the challenge anyone creating a new venue has to face. So, *Bar* interviewed Ben Galloway of Artifex London about the trials and tribulations of being part of a multi-million pound renovation challenge.

Bar Magazine, venue focus, February/March 2007

Room for Improvement

The newly renamed "InterContinental London Park Lane" reopened its doors on 6 November 2006 after a 60 million-pound refurbishment. The first phase saw the unveiling of a vibrant reception area, lobby bar and elegant restaurant in addition to the opening of the first guest rooms.

Artifex London Ltd were first approached in 2004 by London-based designers J2 Design and consulted about concepts for a new lounge bar at the InterContinental Hotel as well as ideas for a series of wall-mounted panels for the hotel reception lobby. Both the lobby bar and the panels were to utilise a unique product invented by Artifex, "Glass Inlaid Marble".

The design team at J2, Josh Judd and Rebecca Roberts met with Ben Galloway from Artifex London in October 2004 at the London studio of artist Alan Halliday. Artifex have had a long association with the artist having collaborated on a number of projects in the past. For the InterContinental, Halliday was commissioned by Artifex to produce images of six local London landmarks, which could then be cut into six square panels of Italian travertine and inlaid with amber glass. He was commissioned additionally to create a design for the front of the lobby bar which was also to be constructed from Glass Inlaid Marble.

Design Mix

The bar features black Belgian marble with abstract ribbons of amber glass to Halliday's design running across its 6-metre length. Like the lobby panels, the glass inlay is illuminated from behind using a conventional fluorescent lighting system. The bar top is constructed from a veneer-cut, translucent honey-coloured onyx, which is laminated to glass to enhance its structural integrity and is lit by a Prismex fibre-optic lighting system, supplied by Universal Fibre Optics.

Artifex London specialises in the supply and distribution of newly developed glass and stone products to architects, designers and other specifiers of building and decorative materials worldwide. Recent projects include the bar and restaurant features in 'Tutti Frutti', (a mineral terrazzo glass-laminate) for the Inc Bar in Greenwich, the Diamond Club bar in glass-laminated honey onyx for the new Emirates Stadium and a 14 metre bar for the Virgin Atlantic first class departure lounge at Heathrow Airport.

Asked about the kind of problems his firm might encounter supplying projects of this kind, Ben said:

"From a technical point of view, I can honestly say that things went remarkably well with the InterContinental project it's not always possible to say that. The only real problem was the stone we selected. The Belgian black marble, which our stone masons in Italy had never worked before, is ostensibly a very dense slate rather than a marble but prized because it is as close to being as 'pure black' in

colour as any other natural material commercially available. In other words it is without inclusions of quartz or other minerals which would give it a veined or mottled appearance, and it was precisely for this reason that it was selected. It was extremely difficult to work by hand or with machine tools, dramatically adding to the production time and to the cost".

Asked about the likely implications of such difficulties, Ben said:

"Once a contractor has specified your product, agreed a price and contracts have been signed, it's rather too late to go back to them asking for more money because production costs have suddenly escalated. Small companies like ours in spite of offering niche-market products still need to price them competitively if they are to win new business. It forces them to operate within small margins. The margins for error are consequently equally small. You spend a great deal of time hoping that problems of this kind, one might even call them 'mistakes', don't turn out to be terminally costly. It's a steep learning curve but these are the kind of lessons which can only be learnt through bitter experience. There is a degree of responsibility, a duty of care, long after your products have been installed. This is as it should be especially with natural products like stone which are often required to perform in somewhat harsh environments, (cocktail bar-staff please take note), and conscientious companies generally take those responsibilities seriously. But I am certain I won't be the only supplier who, in the early days, felt terrorised and traumatised by the list of things needing to be 'put right', long after a project was supposedly complete. The dreaded 'snagging list' can sometimes seem endless. A handful of minor things in need of remedy is quite usual and nothing to fear, but a seriously long list of post-installation nightmares not only threatens to rob a company of all the joy derived from winning the contract, it can actually threaten its very survival. Mistakes can be extremely costly".

Asked whether problems of a technical nature presented the greatest challenge, Ben replied:

"I think the greatest difficulty for my company, and I'm sure many like it, is more one of culture. By this I mean the way in which projects of this kind are usually handled. The usual pattern is that suppliers are contacted initially by the designer, the firm appointed by the client. They will, (hopefully) recommend your products and services for the project and be responsible for managing the relationship between the client and your firm. Although the client may provide the go ahead, may even in certain cases have insisted that your products be used, it is the main contractor who is responsible for engaging your services and it is the main contractor who is responsible for specifying your products. It's forgivable to feel as though you are the 'servant of two masters', but the relationship which largely determines the quality of the experience from the outset is the one you have with the main contractor".

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Asked whether the relationship between supplier and contractor was always a difficult one, Ben acknowledged that many contracting firms are likely to have had bad experiences engaging the services of small design companies and suppliers. He said:

"I'm sure it's a two-way street and I look forward to reading the contra-argument sometime. I apologise in advance to those firms with whom our experience has been extremely good. But no one wants to hear about that so let's generalise about those which have been bad. Contractors are notoriously price conscious, if they can make a few extra quid they will, be prepared for some hard negotiating when it comes to the estimate. I try and apply the same rule adopted by the antique-buying fraternity at auctions but in reverse, decide on your lowest limit and stick to it. Of course this is rather easier to adhere to if you enjoy the luxury of supplying products or services which are not widely available elsewhere, or even occasionally (in the case of Glass Inlaid Marble), totally unique; somewhat harder if you are supplying wallpaper or curtain poles. If a contractor can substitute your products for someone else's, even after months of work, expensive lunches and watertight promises and give the work to a less costly supplier in China or their mate around the corner, they will. If you survive the treachery and actually win the contract that's where the fun begins! For the most part contractors are project managers and glorified builders. They are not remotely interested in the fact that you might imagine yourself to be, (or even actually be), an award winning, design graduate. The designer rims and titanium laptop may be de-rigueur back at the studio or down the Kings Road, but it cuts no ice with the site manager. Prima donnas and design queens need not apply. Leave all that to the real designers on the project. You, are very strictly trade. It matters not if you are supplying concrete floor tiles or this year's 'must haves' in designer chic, you go in through the back door and don't get invited to the opening night party".

Further explaining the cultural divide, Ben added:

"Contractors generally hate small companies supplying ludicrously artsy-fartsy junk that isn't available elsewhere. They are not accustomed to being forced, through lack of alternatives, to engage you or your services. It makes it much harder for them to retain control and the greater the number of untried, untested suppliers there are on a job, the greater the potentiality for cock-ups, delays, even, disasters. It's not easy to get things off on the right foot to begin with. It doesn't sound like a marriage made in heaven does it, and generally speaking, it isn't! You need to learn their language and learn it fast".

Asked what advice he had for small firms in similar circumstances, Ben answered:

"It would be to ensure that you nominate a single person within your company to micro-manage the project and the multiplicity of complex relationships. Far more time than you would expect is

required for this, if things are to go comparatively smoothly. A whole raft of individuals are likely to want a piece of you, structural engineers, lighting designers, the guys who are putting the flooring down et al. And if eventually all goes well you may even end up talking to magazine editors and the client's press department. If you are not a team player, forget it. Someone in your organisational set-up needs to be on top of project management at all times. The contractor needs to know who to call, and as their deadlines approach and the pressure to deliver increases, the calls will become more frequent. They need to know who to speak to and who to blame. You need a particularly thick skin".

Asked whether he was happy with the work his firm had undertaken at the InterContinental, Ben replied:

"The short answer is yes. Sometimes it takes a while for the joy to return, especially if a project has been difficult to deliver for whatever reason, but this is a common experience shared by client, designer, contractor and supplier alike. I visited the hotel recently to inspect the work and to meet the hotel managers and staff. It is rather more important to know whether they are happy, but the reaction to Glass Inlaid Marble seems to be universally positive. It is our hope that it makes an important contribution to the interior of the hotel. The illuminated panels and bar provide a warm and welcoming glow and help establish the right message - a sense of sophisticated design and elegance. I hope they are significant features within the overall scheme".

He went on to explain the importance of the work from the InterContinental's perspective:

"From the hotel's point of view it's not just about interior design or 'wallpaper' as I call it, it's about image and branding. The InterContinental in London has, after all, now become the flagship for the largest hotel group in the world. . Glass Inlaid Marble is the first thing guests and visitors see when they arrive, it's all about creating the right first impressions. I hope the London Panels and the Lobby Bar will be enjoyed by guests and visitors from all over the world for years to come, but I also hope that they become closely associated with the group brand, its corporate identity".

Asked whether he had any final words of advice for other suppliers, Ben said:

"When all's said and done, the really important thing to bare in mind is that although suppliers and small firms are answerable (contractually speaking), to the project managers, ultimately they are working to please a client. It's worth remembering that. A happy client is someone who is likely to recommend you again. Get it right, and with any luck you're being talked about down at the golf club, or around the swimming pools of their villas in Spain. They may ask you to decorate their yacht next time, who knows, or at the very least, put a word in for you with the contractor responsible".