

# Global Practice

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Design quickly follows money and money always follows power. Baroque architecture was the international language of the Counter-Reformation and is found everywhere from Poland to Brazil. Lutyens and Baker, and their lesser followers, rolled out the iconography of the British Empire throughout India and Africa and Palestine. In the great post-World War II period of American economic imperialism, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill performed a similar service worldwide for corporate giants. Arguably, in the 1980s, following the deregulation and globalization of the banking industry, London only just managed to survive as one of the three great international financial services centers, by rapidly importing great chunks of U.S. know-how in office design. Each of these episodes marked a change in the international scope and the ambition of the design professions.

However, architectural and design projects are inevitably site specific. Most are tiny. This is why the vast majority of design and architectural practices operate on a highly local basis. Robert Gutman, one of the very few sociologists who have taken a serious interest in the architectural profession, tells us in his book, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1988), how few large practices there are, and how very many small ones. In the late 1970s—there is no reason to believe that the overall shape of the figures is substantially different today—there were 25,000 architectural offices in the United States, of which half were one-person offices doing minor jobs. One-half of the remaining 12,500 had fewer than five employees, including technicians and support staff. Only 10 percent of these practices employed more than 20 employees. Two percent of the total 250 firms had more than 50 employees, and these firms collected 30 percent of all fees for architectural services. More up-to-date information from *World Architecture's* October 2000 survey of the world's largest interior design practices reveals a huge range from the largest practice to the smallest, even in the already highly selected group of the top 100 firms. The biggest Top-100 interior design practice, Gensler, employs 980 interior design