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JULY/AUGUST 2010

**MCM Interiors Ltd.**

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## Saia Barbarese Topouzanov Architects

Respect for culture and place oversees award-winning international architect



Upcoming events,  
expos & design  
shows on p. 98

# MACKAY | WONG STRATEGIC DESIGN, INC.

Founders scrutinize popular sustainable offerings to separate the green from the imitation

BY DANIEL CASCIATO

**AT A GLANCE**

**LOCATION:** TORONTO, ON  
**FOUNDED:** 1993  
**EMPLOYEES:** 24  
**AREAS OF SPECIALTY:** INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR DESIGN AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

ALTHOUGH THE PAST YEAR AND A HALF WAS A BIT of a bloodbath in the design and construction industries in North America, firms like Mackay | Wong Strategic Design, Inc. navigated the turbulence rather smoothly. One of the firm's co-founders attributes this to its shrewd instincts and careful business practices.

"The lessons you learn growing a business in a recession really holds you in good stead for growing a business in a very careful manner," says Gordon Mackay, partner of the Toronto-based, international, design and concept

firm, which recently designed the Molson Canadian Hockey House, the 85,000-square-foot pavilion that hosted the players during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver.

Mackay | Wong is not a big proponent of any particular style when it comes to tackling its projects. Instead, it operates like an agency—it focuses on the business specifics of the problem at hand. "Each job comes to us with its own vocabulary and temperament; it's up to our design team to develop an action plan and find the solu-

tion," Mackay explains. "In our studio, we can have up to six projects going on at once, and they will all look very different. Our design philosophy is more of a business philosophy than an aesthetic philosophy. We're a strategic design company that solves problems from the creative side, delivering solutions that launch businesses or take them to the next level."

College classmates who pursued graduate architectural-design degrees at the same school, Mackay and Ron Wong founded the firm together in 1993. Wong graduated first and was working as an in-house designer for a restaurant company in Toronto when he and Mackay reconnected during a social function. Mackay was looking for work. At this point in history—1991—Ontario was in the midst of a brutal recession, and the hope of finding work in an architecture firm was like the hope of a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

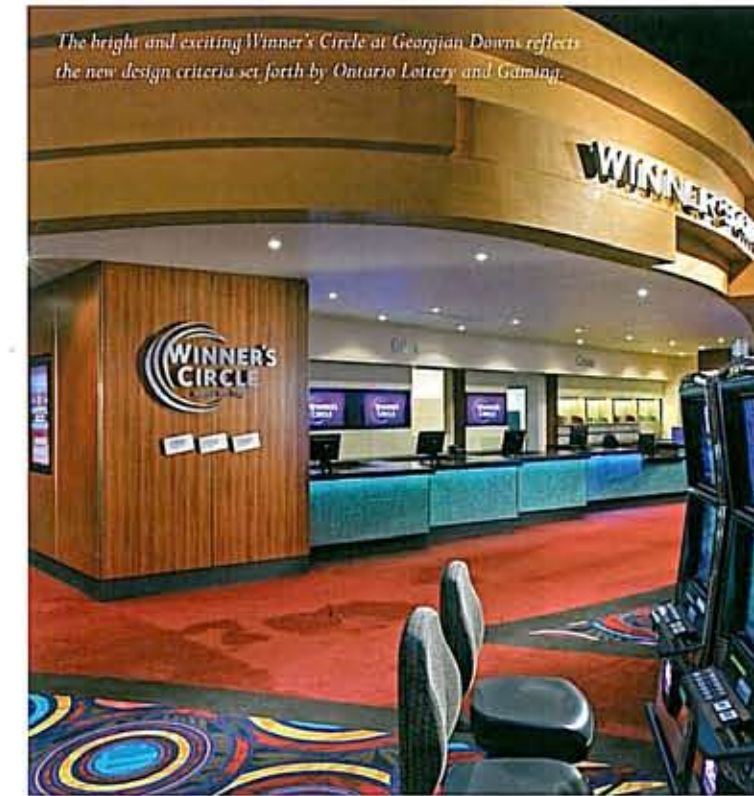
"Ron offered me the opportunity to work with him on these restaurants he was designing," Mackay recalls. "I worked for him for two years before we ended up moving on."

It was about that time that the two entered what would be the first of many design competitions. They won the bid to design Wayne Gretzky's restaurant in Toronto—a dream project for Mackay, who was able to integrate his passion for hockey with the opportunity to design for hockey's biggest superstar. Soon after, they began designing restaurants for major brand names like Hard Rock Café and Rainforest Café. While restaurant design was the pair's bread and butter for the better part of ten years, that experience led to work in other areas such as hotels, airports, stadiums, casinos, and resorts.

Today, Mackay | Wong has four in-house studios built around food and beverage, entertainment and casino, hotel and resort, and brand integration (birthing brands and bridging the gap between business strategies and design).

The firm also is deeply committed to sustainable design. Mackay says that his team is always concerned about the carbon footprint that its projects will leave behind. "For instance, any project that we do on the gaming side looks at LED lighting as the first point of discussion," he says. "We sort through the stuff that is just marketing to determine which products truly reduce our carbon footprint."

Since greenwashing permeated the design and construction industry a few years ago, Mackay | Wong has had to host supplier lunch-and-learns, which puts the suppliers of various allegedly sustainable products through a rigorous question-and-answer period in order for the partners to learn all they can about real sustainability practices and products.



The bright and exciting Winner's Circle at Georgian Downs reflects the new design criteria set forth by Ontario Lottery and Gaming.

## PROJECT SPOTLIGHT: GEORGIA DOWNS

Before Mackay | Wong was chosen to expand the gaming and horse-racing facilities of Georgian Downs in Innisfil, Ontario, the racino was home to 450 slot machines, several restaurants, and a European-style racetrack. Along with an update to its existing amenities, the renovation involved a 50,000-square-foot expansion, which included a new lobby, bar, restaurant, café, and a substantial expansion to the gaming floor.

Leah Tully, a senior design associate at Mackay | Wong, says that because the project had to adhere to the Ontario Lottery and Gaming's recently developed brand standards, it hired an outside LEED consultant to advise whether it still was possible to achieve LEED certification within the new parameters. "With a few changes, it was possible," Tully explains. "We had to specify that the paints be low-VOC paints, as well as low-VOC adhesives and sealants used for the carpet and wall-covering installation. We also specified that the carpet be a wool Axminster carpet, which is a recyclable and renewable product."

Georgian Downs also plans to install an interactive, educational display that will walk guests through the facility's LEED and green initiatives.



At Boiler House Restaurant in Toronto's historic and newly revitalized Distillery District, a mezzanine features old beams and rows of reclaimed fir to preserve the spirit of the original building.