

The power of partnership

The success of many design consultancies often depends upon the synergy between its most experienced leaders. World-renowned German firm K3 is proof that the power of the team is more than just the sum of its parts. Jim Banks spoke to two of its founding partners about their path to the top



Foodservice design agency K3, or K'Drei, has a long-established reputation for creating bespoke solutions that reflect not only a keen understanding of what chefs need to deliver excellent food, but also the technical know-how to make kitchens lean, efficient and stylish.

Its three founding partners have worked together for 20 years and their diverse experience enables them to create a kitchen that provides more than mere utility. The comprehensive consultation, planning, implementation and optimisation services that K3 provides result in a kitchen design process that focuses as much on the experience of its use as on the technical aspects of equipment, workflow and productivity.

The company's three founding partners are **Frank Wagner** FCSI, current president of FCSI Germany-Austria; former chef **Helge Peter Pahlke** FCSI; and **Peter Neumann**. While they work closely within the agency, each has a different focus. While Wagner concentrates on developing holistic foodservice solutions and kitchen planning for gastronomic projects and hotels in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Neumann is focused on similar projects in the company's domestic market of Germany. Pahlke, meanwhile, shares Wagner's international portfolio with a special emphasis on the Middle East.

"All three of us were working in the same company in 1998 when we decided to close it because of difficulties with another partner. Peter and I started K3 and Helge went to work with a kitchen supplier until he came to join us in 2008. The company where we met was Profil Concept

Planungsbüro and I had been working there since 1991. In 1994 we took it over. It was focused on shop design and food courts, mainly in the bakery sector. The big turning point was when we got a big contract for 500 staff canteens from the German national railway company. We had to do everything from kitchen design to architecture and interior design," explains Wagner.

"When K3 started it was just Peter and I plus one kitchen designer. We went back to basics. We tried to get into the hotel business rather than working on canteens, but that is where we started before we started working on big hotel projects. Our first big hotel project was for a cruise line that developed a resort concept on huge sites with pools and saunas. We developed the concepts and prototypes for the kitchens in the buffet restaurants and then the Michelin-star restaurants. The kitchens were small and the chefs came from the cruise ships. Then we worked with Radisson. In the 1990s we learnt a lot about open kitchens, cruise kitchens, grills, tandoor ovens and many other things," he adds.

Crossing borders

When Pahlke left Profil he went on to develop additional skills that he would bring back into K3. His experience as a chef, which saw him work in hotels including the Sheraton at Frankfurt Airport and the Ramada International Hotels Eschborn & Frankfurt, already gave him a different perspective to his colleagues.

"Before I joined I got experience at CITTI, one of the largest kitchen houses in Germany, which was a

supplier to the Marriott hotel chain and was involved in projects with five-star hotels in Berlin. I started out as a chef, first in Germany and then in London where I worked at Claridge's hotel. When I went back to Germany I was working in technical development in Frankfurt, but I wanted to get back to Berlin, where I met Frank when we were working at the same company in Kreuzberg. We have very different backgrounds and we bring different things to the business. I was a chef, so I can speak the same languages as the chefs we deal with now at K3."



The ability to fuse an understanding of both cuisine and engineering allowed K3 to prosper and ultimately become a truly international operation.



"The international aspect has come over time rather than being our focus from the beginning. We now have people in the company who speak Russian, Spanish and English, but at the start we were focused on hotel projects in Germany. With the financial crisis we saw that the hotel industry suffered, so it was risky to be focused on one market," says Wagner.



"That is partly why we went abroad to look for new projects. We needed to make sure we had work for our employees. Working on projects abroad makes sense. For instance, if Russia sees a downturn then the Middle East might be less affected and having work there helps to balance the business," he adds.

Indeed, this policy has proven wise as there has been a slowdown in projects coming from Russia due to political tensions and economic sanctions. So, the focus for K3 is firmly on its domestic market, the



**In his own words
Frank Wagner FCSI**

"I come from the DDR - East Germany - and I studied engineering, technology and integrated sciences - what some people might think is the really boring stuff. I started out as an engineer designing test plants for all kinds of things including seaweed production as well as bakeries for bread and cakes. The change came with the reunification of Germany in 1990, I ended up at the same company as Helge and I was designing kitchens. "We come at our work from different angles. He has a love of food, whereas I have a love of engineering and machinery. I understand what the technical people are saying. I can talk to ventilation engineers, for instance, and Peter has an engineering background, too. Between the three of us we can bridge the gap between the chef's vision and the practical reality of designing and building a kitchen. "All of the partners at K3 have a different style and our clients come to us as people. We all have our own clients and mainly we each work on our own projects, but we do share our different perspectives and knowledge. One thing that is different is that we each tend to work in different countries. I don't do many jobs in Germany - most of those go to Peter - because I focus more on Russia, Georgia and Africa. Peter will also work in other EU countries and he is getting more jobs in Italy and the Netherlands, for example, while Helge does more jobs in the Middle East. The world is too big for us to each look at every possible location for a new project."



Middle East and Africa for now. The company is working with Leonardo Hotels as the chain expands outside Germany and is engaged with airline Lufthansa on new projects.

"There are many projects happening in Spain and Saudi Arabia is booming. We have an office in Dubai now. Africa is coming back strongly and we recently finished a Radisson hotel in Nairobi. The people in Africa are real engineers rather than computer users, which is refreshing," notes Pahlke.

Built on integrity

The values that have driven K3's success are honesty, integrity and attentiveness to clients' needs.

"One thing that makes us successful and brings big clients to us is our 20 years of experience. But first and foremost it is about listening. That is what we teach our trainees. The first thing we do is listen to what our clients want and then we're honest about whether what we do fits with their vision. In some cases a local kitchen designer might be a better option for a project outside Germany because it needs someone on-site who knows everybody. We know when a project is right for us and because we are honest about that our clients stay with us and recommend us to others," says Wagner.

"No one can teach kitchen design at university because it takes years of experience to understand how to do it. We bring in young engineers and economics students because we can teach them here how to design kitchens. We have young people coming in and developing their own clients because kitchen design is a people business and one of the things that sets K3 apart is that we

understand that. We teach people to listen and to be honest in how they deal with clients," he adds.

There is an inherent understanding at K3 of how important each project is to the client, for whom the design of a new kitchen may happen only once or twice in a lifetime. Even if clients are big corporations Wagner and his colleagues recognise that they are putting their money into it and the project will have a big impact on their success.

Looking at past projects one common feature of K3's work is that the company tends not to do big kitchens, which Wagner believes are often a waste of money. He teaches trainees that kitchens should be just big enough to do the job because the money is made in the dining area, not in the kitchen.

"One of the most important projects for me was the biggest one we ever did - the development of the canteens for the railway company. It meant completing 500 projects in three years and we were only 28 years old at the time. Afterwards I understood why none of the big project management firms wanted to do it. But I could also look at the big resort hotels we did, or a 3,000 sq m project we did here in Germany - all of them were challenging and had unique aspects to them," Wagner says.

"I love to do food courts and shopping malls. Early on, Helge and I renovated a big food court to develop a new concept that would encourage people to dine there. People were using it but they were not staying to eat, so we thought it would be a good idea to work with people who do set design for films. In three weeks we completed the project with painted

CURRENT PROJECTS:

- Hotel Kaiserstrand**
(Bansin, Germany)
- Radisson Blu Misrata**
(Misrata, Libya)
- Park Inn Hotel Riyadh**
(Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)
- Berlin Chemie**
(Berlin, Germany)
- Investment Bank of Brandenburg**
(Potsdam, Germany)

PAST PROJECTS:

- Radisson Blu Airport Hotel**
(Hamburg, Germany)
- Jumeirah Port Soller**
(Mallorca, Spain)
- Hotel Kloster Haydau**
(Morschen, Germany)
- Siemens staff restaurant**
(Görlitz, Germany)
- Beuth University cafeteria**
(Berlin, Germany)

scenery and soon the food court was booming. It was an original idea and it worked," he adds.

The Deutsche Bahn canteen project also stands out as one of the milestones for Pahlke, which is unsurprising given its scale and the time pressure on delivery. But there are many more. He looks back on a 10,000 sq m function hall project in St Petersburg, Russia, which was challenging from the

perspective of the flow of traffic, and which required a tunnel to be constructed to link the buildings on site. But what excites him the most is perhaps the ability to combine his different perspective as a chef with the mindset of a designer and create a vision that is both visionary and practical, and which meets the demands of the far-flung destinations to which he is constantly travelling.

"For me, the Middle East and Africa are important markets. I worked on a great project in South Africa in 2009. One of our biggest clients - Radisson - got us to work on two five-star hotels in Johannesburg in preparation for the 2010 World Cup," Pahlke says.

"The international side will always be important," says Wagner, "but our priority is to be established in the booming market of Germany. We want to be strong in our home base, which is where our bread-and-butter work comes from. People from abroad are investing heavily here." ■