

KBB **Space**

Issue 10 design • specify • develop

Setting the standard

Bathroom's big hitters size up the contract market

The visionaries

**An insight into hotel Missoni
New culinary concepts
in Corian**

Rewriting the classics

Babington House

Edinburgh's The Quatermile, Rosita Missoni interview, Ideal Standard's Roger Cooper, The Sleep Event, Grohe's Jan-Peter Tewes, Suna Design for Centrus at The Meads, Blacksheep at Inamo



Building partnerships

This approach has kept the company one step ahead not only in the contract market but also in the retail sector, and continues to do so with ongoing contracts for the InterContinental Hotel Group and work on the new Government-backed 'Building Schools for the Future' (BSF) in the pipeline. Yet, it appears to be just one strand of Ideal Standard's commercial business strategy. Cooper points to the company's commitment to the market and his highly trained contract's team supported by a back-up office based in Hull. "The real challenge in this market is the fact that so many different parties can be working on just one project," Cooper says. "The architect, for instance, may be based in London, the contractor in Spain and the interior designer in Milan – you have to find out who will decide on the sanitaryware, which means spending time with all of them. Networking is the key. You need to have good systems in place, good people in the field and patience. That takes someone in the appropriate countries providing liaison and selling effort to complete the deal."

The development of partnerships is something that Ideal Standard takes very seriously, particularly when it comes to architects. So much so, a division of its

Renowned for its collaboration with some of the world's most famous designers and architects, Concept is born from Ideal's long-standing relationship with designer, Robin Levien



contract's team is based in London and charged with the task of building and maintaining relationships with architects as well as "staying on the pulse of what is going on in the City and South East corner." In fact, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) lectures are a mainstay of the Ideal Standard offer. "Architects have to keep in touch with what is going on, so come along to our CPD lectures," Cooper explains. "We are hugely dedicated to this area. There is a lot to it in terms of management and organisation. However, it's a big, important part of what we do. If ever there was a networking need, it's in this area."

This year, Ideal Standard's commitment to architects is being strengthened with what is a new and significant step for the company – the opening of its own IS Studio in 'London's architect quarter'. "These premises," Cooper says, "will be open for architects to visit, see displays, talk about specification and follow through any leads we have."

Rise and fall

The state of the current commercial market is one that Cooper views with refreshing realism. However, his experience suggests there are areas or "hotspots" that offer real opportunity for 2009.

"You only have to read the newspapers to understand what is happening in the residential market," he continues. "When developments like London's Cheese Grater – a response to the iconic Gherkin – are put on ice, that's a good indication of the state of the market. Those kind of projects are rarely shelved so far down the line."

Yet, despite the downturn, Ideal Standard has witnessed a buoyant market in the public sector, notably in hospitals and health care; sectors that are sensitive to the infection risk of poor or old sanitary installations. Here, Cooper highlights considerable investment. "They are looking for products with innovation that help reduce the risk of disease," he explains. "As such easy-clean designs, which eliminate infection-harbouring crevices or areas where drugs could be hidden are proving very popular."



above: Jasper Morrison's Signature bath

left: The Concept collection offers Ideal Standard's largest ever selection of fittings for the bathroom

The question for 2009, he continues, is whether current levels of Government spending continue. "The big debate is whether Gordon Brown goes ahead to say the solution to this recession is to spend our way out of it. If this happens, levels of investment will continue to remain high. If the Government's answer is to cut back, the market will be affected," he says. "The good news for us is that when you try to stop that train, it doesn't stop abruptly as we have seen in the residential sector. Once a decision has been made to build a new hospital you have to take it through to completion. There's a much longer wind-down cycle."

In the hotel sector too, Cooper can see some opportunity in the market – although he points to the challenges presented by a reliance on pod-based installation. "Clearly for 2012 there will be some refurbishment of hotels for the Olympics and some investment in new hotels," he states. "I think the interesting challenge is that bathrooms and, in some cases, bedroom-bathrooms are pre-built in pods. Often, they are pre-assembled and pre-tiled in the factory and then craned into place for a fast build up. These can be made overseas as well as in the UK and, naturally, the international element of this business requires more management."

Nevertheless, at the top-end of the market, John Robinson has seen an interesting shift in the way hotels are specifying with a current trend towards innovative, design-led products. "There has been something of a renaissance in the quality of the product being specified – ceramic disc technology, under-pinned counter basins and, where the bathroom is large enough, the introduction of 'his' and 'hers' basins," he explains. "Large baths are also becoming popular as are walk-in thermostatically-controlled showers. Hotels are doing well."

Firm foundations?

Yet, turning his attention back to the commercial residential market, Cooper is careful not to 'sugar coat' the depth of the downturn and the knock-on effect in the retail sector. However, he does concede that a level of up-specification is helping some developers to differentiate their property offer from those of their competitors. "It's an interesting market and there has been a huge fall due to the availability of mortgages," he says. "I saw something of this trend in my first years at Ideal Standard. In this recession, central heating (that was not installed as standard at the time) became that something extra and, of course, is now part of the standard fabric of a home.

"I think a lot of property was being built with what you could call standardised products – not economy but not the comfort products you might expect – and this may change. We currently have eight sites with a big national builder who has upgraded from Alto, our mid-range product, to our new Robin Levien-designed Concept range because they believe it will help sell the houses, and it's working."

The key, it seems, is consumer demand and because of this Cooper perceives the UK recovering with less difficulty from recession than other countries in downturn. "The level of new build in the UK was actually in line with what the consumer wanted. In Ireland, in just one year, 90,000 houses were built for a population of four million. Here, we built 160,000 homes for a population of nearly 60 million. So you can see, in some countries like Ireland and Spain, the dynamics were out of kilter," he concludes. "When the whirly gig stopped, there was a realisation that even when building came to a standstill there was still a year's supply of unsold houses. However, I don't think we got it too far wrong in the UK and I believe we will bounce back." 