

REINVENTING NORMAL

In an exclusive interview, Landini Associates' Creative Director Mark Landini talks about the design company's recent reinvention of the SSG Food Market in South Korea and the Canadian project that made its name internationally.

By Adam James.

When the Landini Associates team transformed the former home of the Toronto Maple Leafs ice hockey team, Maple Leaf Gardens, into a spectacular supermarket in 2009, there was a real buzz about the place. People lined the snow-covered pavements for several blocks, eager to get inside and see what had become of their hallowed old sports stadium. A new standard had been set.

In fact, it created such a buzz that work began flooding in to the point where the Sydney based company's Creative Director, Mark Landini, didn't need to worry about frequent flyer points any more. Loblaw's Maple Leaf Gardens was the main catalyst that propelled his company into global supermarket design stardom.

Ten years on, in the upmarket Seoul suburb of Dogok Seoul, Emart hypermarkets, the leading business of South Korean retailer Shinsegae group, has recently opened SSG Food Market, a Landini Associates design that fulfils the brief of creating a world class premium supermarket and food hall fusion.

The project included the built environment, naming and identity, furniture and fixtures, signage and communications, ticketing, menus, POS, advertising style guides, packaging and uniforms. In fact, every customer touchpoint.

Speaking exclusively to *Retail World*, Mr Landini chatted freely about this latest South Korean offering and shared his memories of the famed Maple Leaf Gardens and also his thoughts on current design trends.

I want to talk to you about the Seoul food market. What was the process in getting this contract?

The process was simple. We were



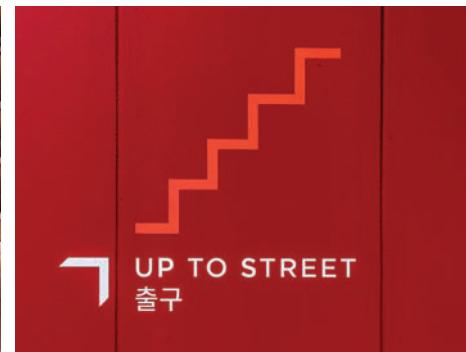
Landini Associates Creative Director Mark Landini.
Photograph by Michele Aboud.

approached by an American consulting company that works for Emart. We were then invited to Seoul to meet with the Vice Chairman, who leads all their design projects. He shared his passion for design with us and we talked about our approach to various projects, before being invited to undertake this one. Like most clients they found us through our portfolio – I think specifically because of Maple Leaf Gardens, a supermarket concept that we did for Loblaw's in 2009 and which we continue to develop.

Well that's really good, right?

Yes, it has been good for business and great for our Air Miles [frequent flyer rewards]. We've always worked internationally, but more so since we did that project. It's been called 'the best supermarket on the planet' and visited by every major retailer's board, so I guess it was on brief.

And it was an incredible brief, which was to 'create the best food store in the world'. Surprisingly not an 'ask' you get every day.



If you want to stay in the physical food business, you need to have a reason for people to spend time with you.”

At that time most supermarkets were made out of plastic and laminate – fake materials, pretending to be something that they’re not. And I hate that. I hate theming. I hate retailers assuming that people are stupid or can be convinced they are in Siena by some faux painting on the wall, when in fact they’re really in Dee Why [Sydney].

I think anything that pretends to be something that it’s not, particularly when it’s selling something real like food, is just condescending. So, what we did at Loblaw’s was to concentrate on presenting the food as best we could, and then making a beautiful space. We celebrated colour like it had never been used in food before, and we used concrete and stainless steel and glass. Real materials for real life. We wanted our work to last.

I think low embodied energy is one of the things that designers can have a realistic input into, and that means making things that don’t get thrown away or disposed of. And so, by using classic materials, our work lasts longer than if you didn’t. That’s how we won it.

So, what was in Maple Leaf Gardens before?

Canadians are completely mad for hockey. And the most famous team in Canada is the Toronto Maple Leafs. Our client bought their stadium.

Putting a supermarket in MLG [Maple Leaf Gardens] was akin to putting a drive-through in the Vatican or a 7-Eleven on the turf of the MCG. You know, you just don’t do it, it’s just not done. So, everyone was waiting to see what it would look like. The night before it opened there was snow up to your knees in Toronto. It was mind-numbingly cold, but there was a very determined queue overnight for three city blocks waiting to come in. Not because they’d heard we’d designed it, but because they were interested to see what had been done to this sacred place.

And in terms of the SSG Food Market in Seoul, what was there before?

Well, we never get asked to replace something that’s brilliant.

Previously they ran a 40,000 square-foot [3,700sqm] mildly-premium supermarket,

with a food court and coffee shop; small for Emart. Our brief was to help them reinvent it as more of an integrated food experience. It’s rare that you’re asked to redesign something that’s trading its legs off, and so part of what we did was work with their team on what it could be, what it should sell, and how.

I’ve noticed in the blurb there’s a fresh market as well as restaurants. Was it hard to make the transition between the public walking in and asking, ‘is this a fresh market or is it a restaurant or is it something else?’

A lot of retailers think that they need to invent something new when it comes to food, when in fact they don’t. They actually just need to look at what’s already been done really well in the past and then reinvent it. We call it ‘reinventing normal’. Food is the antidote to this antiseptic and virtual world that we live in. Food is one of the few things that is real today. You can still touch it, taste it, smell it, and share it around a table, like we’re sitting at now.

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So, all you've got to do is look back at how it was done really well in the past, before supermarkets messed it up. And supermarkets really did mess up the human experience of buying food. Supermarkets aren't generally places where you'd want to commune, or spend time. Marketplaces are.

A food market is a place to shop, meet and to eat in. And in eating you share a part of the human experience, defined by food, that is so special. We've been doing it for millennia around camp fires so we're not inventing anything new. We're reinventing something that's already very good, before it got turned into a machine.

That's what supermarkets are, they're "selling machines" and some people have sort of said, "Well, we don't really like that experience anymore". So, they'll get their stuff delivered online or go to Aldi which is easy and brilliant value. As such the middle ground is struggling and if you want to stay in the physical food

business, you need to have a reason for people to spend time with you.

You were saying on the phone to me that since the complete change of this food market in Seoul there's been a significant increase in foot traffic. Yes, it's incredible. There's a queue at the door before it opens, and within minutes the dining areas are full for the whole day. I'm told by our client that it's become one of the go-to places in Seoul.

I think one of the reasons is because there aren't that many great places to hang out in Seoul. There aren't many parks, and it's not really a walk around city like Manhattan, or as I think cities should be. So maybe that's why it's successful. It's a good place to hang out in, and we've always designed places for people to hang out in; interesting places full of vibrancy and life.

Do you think lighting can help a store look better?

Yes, I do, but good lighting makes people look better too. And if people

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look good then they feel good, and if they feel good then they stay. After the age of 35 most of us look better in a kinder light, so what people forget when they're lighting spaces, is they forget about shadow.

Think about it. If you're standing in the back of a dark cave in which direction do you move? You move towards the sunlight, right? So, if you want people to move around a space, then create lots of shadow, and use light to help them move toward it. And if they're dining, have as little light as possible. When they go to the bathroom, make it as dark as you reasonably can. Because if you put a light over someone's head in a bathroom, or in the changing room, and they look at themselves in the mirror, they'll go, "I look shit, I'm going to the gym. I'm not going to go back to have dessert".

So, you have to make people look good. And then they feel good, and if they feel good, they're going to stay. It's really basic stuff. It's not complicated.

What key things did you learn about Seoul? Did you come away thinking, ‘Wow, I’ve learnt something new?’

We did. There’s a much more respectful and gracious way of selling and interacting with people in Korea than in the West. For example, the deli case isn’t something an assistant stands behind. It opens from the front and you engage with your customer as you serve them.

We did this intuitively at Loblaw’s with cheese. They asked us to create a cheese room, which we thought was overdone, so we created a six-metre high cheese wall which you service from the front. So, customers choose to help themselves or stand beside the person who’s helping them, which is much nicer right? And that’s how they do it in Korea. It’s a more friendly, more helpful and more elegant experience.

Six metres?

Six metres, yes. The tallest cheese wall in the world. Very Instagrammed!

I was interviewed the other day by a Hong Kong magazine about how

often our briefs now have the word ‘Instagrammable’ in them.

The word ‘authentic’ used to be in every brief but now it’s ‘Instagrammable’ that happens all the time.

Initially when I was asked the question it was like, ‘Yeah, it’s true, and I feel really shallow for doing that’. But I’ve never really analysed it before. So, apart from proving to everyone that you’re living a better, more exciting and glamorous life than they are, it’s actually just storytelling for the modern world.

Instagram is just people telling other people a story. I have an Instagram account, but it’s only used by my friends and family. And it’s just a way of keeping in touch when I travel. It’s a kind of visual diary, if you like, of my life. And really, it’s just storytelling, which goes back to my earlier point, which is, food is the place that you commune around the fire and tell stories.

Telling stories is just homo sapiens’ way of learning, sharing and allowing their emotions to come flooding out

through their mouths, and genuinely interact. And I think Instagram is a kind of modern way of storytelling. So, I think, you know, Instagrammable moments are important, and we certainly built some into the SSG Food Market project.

Did you learn anything else?

I was reminded how clients can get the best from their designers, which is by playing an active role in the journey. We always try to work with the person who either owns the business or makes the calls. That way you get the best results.

For this project we worked with a great team led by the Vice Chairman of Emart, Mr Chung. He’s an incredibly dynamic leader and really interested in design. He came to Sydney and spent time in this room talking and drawing with us, and then days in his office in Seoul doing the same. The reason he did this was because he wanted to learn from us, knew we needed to learn from him, and believed that the project would benefit. Also, it was the most efficient way of working.

It was a really rewarding approach, for us and for the project, because you create a relationship with your client, one of mutual respect, and then you create something better and more valuable than if you hadn’t.

Many of our clients do this and we encourage it. Loblaw’s, our clients from Canada, come regularly and spend a week working with us here. Recently we spent three days in Chicago with a client working with them, and we’re going to Russia to spend time working with a client next week, but still it’s quite rare.

But think about it. It’s a really obvious thing to do. If someone is running a business and challenging you to redesign it, or help them reinvent it, then don’t you think that that person should spend some time with their designers? Because if they don’t, perhaps they’re not valuing design. And if they don’t value design then why use design? Because design can be a very powerful business tool, and can make people a truckload of money, if used properly. That’s what we do, we help people make truckloads of money. That’s our job. We’re commercial designers. Oh, by the way SSG Food Market is trading in the ‘truckload’ business.



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