

## Thorsсен:

BY HAROLD MANDEL

## carving a niche in the furniture business

**BOB THORSSEN** is testament to the fact that the Canadian entrepreneurial spirit is alive, well and succeeding in Hong Kong.

The Calgary native has been doing business in Hong Kong for 15 years. Initially he imported silk plants from Hong Kong to Canada, earning the nickname "Jungle Bob" from his customers.

Due to his experience in Asia, SMED, a Calgary-based manufacturer of high-quality wood systems furniture, appointed him to establish and operate SMED Asia Limited in mid-1989. Thorsсен arrived in Hong Kong shortly thereafter and has resided in the territory ever since.

**W**hen he first arrived in Hong Kong, Thorsсен was in the unenviable position of being an unknown quantity with an unknown product in one of the world's most fiercely competitive furniture markets.

Recalling the early days of establishing SMED Asia, Thorsсен notes that any entrepreneur who wants to compete in Hong Kong must have a great deal of guts and staying power. "Newcomers often run into a catch-22 situation in which businesses do not want to deal with you until you have proven yourself on local projects," he says. But by carving SMED a significant niche in Asia's furniture market, "Jungle Bob" has shown that obstacles facing the unknown entrepreneur can be overcome.

**L**ess than four years after arriving in Hong Kong he has built a successful business importing customized Canadian manufactured furniture. His clients include such companies as: Banque Nationale de Paris, Knight Frank Kan & Baleau, The Commission for Canada, Hongkong Bank Trustee Ltd, Holiday Inn and Hongkong Telecom.

One of Thorsсен's most notable achievements was the successful tender of the contract to supply all the furniture, seating and partitions for all 10 floors of the

new Tung Wah Hospital Group administrative headquarters. This was a substantial undertaking as the hospital required furniture for directors and managers of offices as well as secretarial, reception, general office furniture and guest seating.

SMED was established in 1980 as an offshoot of KP Manufacturing which has been in the custom-mill work business for over 65 years. SMED now has sales of approximately US\$50 million annually and employs over 500 people in its Calgary Alberta facility.

Thorsсен says the secret to SMED's success is two-fold. First of all, SMED office furniture systems feature custom finishes and the ability to produce custom-sized components. As in the State Street Bank project at Hong Kong's Exchange Square, a designer or architect is not forced to design the interior around a manufacturer's standard line product; clients receive all the functional benefits of a systems product and still have a finished project they can identify with as uniquely their own.

**A**lso, SMED has an almost unbeatable time of under four weeks from the factory. "My clients always receive their furniture in Hong Kong within seven to eight weeks of making their order," says Thorsсен.

This demonstrated commitment to quality and service has helped Thorsсен build awareness of SMED furniture throughout the territory. Logic Office Supplies has signed on as SMED Asia's exclusive dealers for Hong Kong, Macau and China and their Hennessy Road showrooms showcase several SMED work stations.

The growing success of SMED Asia has not changed Thorsсен a great deal: he still prefers working out of his office known as "SMED Towers" overlooking the Aberdeen Marina and continues to enjoy living at the Marina on his junk aptly named "Club SMED." ♦



Entrepreneur Bob Thorsсен on his junk at the Aberdeen Marina. His office, SMED Towers, is only a few steps away.



An example of the office furniture made by SMED.