

Designing for Difference

WHAT GLOBAL CLUB MODELS CAN TEACH PRIVATE CLUBS AT HOME

By Howard Kuo, AIA, Principal and Co-Founder - Kuo Diedrich Chi



Matalda Golf Clubhouse, Croatia

Globalization has influenced the private club industry, including how clubs are planned, designed, and operated. As member expectations evolve, successful clubs are looking beyond their borders to adopt best practices.

We'll outline:

- *Key differences in international and domestic club models*
- *Expectations that shape club models*
- *Practical ideas that domestic clubs can apply to elevate the member experience*

UNDERSTANDING THE MODEL: INTERNATIONAL VS. DOMESTIC CLUBS

At its core, the biggest distinction between international and domestic projects mirrors the difference between the hotel and club businesses.

Most international clubs operate within a hospitality-driven model. They are often part of a broader resort, where success depends on attracting guests who may only visit once. In this setting:

- Amenities like golf, dining, spa, and fitness are expected to perform as standalone revenue centers.
- The focus is on per-visit spending rather than long-term retention.
- The environment must be easy to understand and immediately feel valuable.

In contrast, most private clubs in the United States operate on a recurring dues model:

- Amenities support member satisfaction rather than direct profitability
- Financial performance depends on long-term engagement and retention
- Members are familiar with the club, which reduces the need for highly structured experiences

International clubs often sit between these two models. They need to deliver the exclusivity of a private club while also ensuring that amenities are financially viable. This creates a hybrid approach that requires both strong experiences and operational discipline.

DESIGNING FOR BEHAVIOR: KEY DIFFERENCES

These business models directly shape how clubs are designed and used.

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Yanqi Lake, Beijing, China

1. **First-time Use vs. Familiarity** - International clubs often serve a high percentage of first-time users, so design must focus on clear arrival, intuitive navigation, and a logical flow from entry to departure. Domestic clubs, by comparison, benefit from a membership base that already knows the environment, often reducing the urgency of these design considerations.

2. **Clubhouse as a Destination** - In many international settings, the clubhouse functions as more than a support facility - it becomes a central hub of activity, sometimes operating like a boutique hospitality venue. This impacts:

- The scale and prominence of lounges
- The positioning and visibility of dining venues
- Locker room functionality and circulation
- Operational elements such as bag storage and staging

3. **New Build vs. Evolution** - International clubs are often developed from scratch, requiring alignment

between land planning, golf course design, and clubhouse architecture. Domestic clubs, in contrast, tend to evolve through renovations and additions.

4. **Cultural Influence on Use** - Local customs and norms shape how golf is played and how facilities are used. Pace of play, group dynamics and pre- and post-round rituals are factors that influence spatial planning and the sequencing of experiences throughout the property.

WHAT DOMESTIC CLUBS CAN LEARN

There are several practical takeaways from international club design that can benefit domestic clubs.

Elevate the Arrival Experience

Clubs that rely on familiarity often underinvest in the arrival sequence. However, a stronger sense of arrival can set the tone for every visit and reinforce value. Even long-time members benefit from a sense of occasion.



Pinhal Golf Algarve, Portugal



Golf Clubhouse near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Reimagine Lounge and Work Spaces

International clubs often integrate flexible, hospitality-inspired environments that support both socializing and working. Member expectations are changing, and there is a growing demand for hybrid social/work settings that extend the club's relevance beyond recreation alone.

Design for Clarity and Flow

Even in familiar environments, intuitive layouts reduce friction and improve the overall experience. Clear sightlines and purposeful circulation benefit both members and staff, improving the member experience and daily operations.

THE LESSON IN REVERSE

The exchange of ideas goes both ways. International clubs can draw key lessons from the strengths of domestic private clubs, particularly in social spaces. In the U.S., bars and casual dining venues often serve as the emotional and social heart of the club. These spaces succeed because they are:

- Welcoming and unpretentious
- Highly visible and centrally located
- Seamlessly connected to both indoor and outdoor environments

This focus on social connection and atmosphere is a valuable model for creating community within global club settings.

A CONVERGING FUTURE

As private clubs continue to evolve, the line between domestic and international clubs is blurring. Members are becoming increasingly global, and their expectations and experiences across hospitality, work, and leisure are broadening.

The most successful clubs will combine the clarity and intentional design of international models with the strong sense of community found in traditional private clubs. Clubs that do this well will be better positioned to meet rising expectations and deliver more meaningful experiences for members and guests. ✂