

Architects win Chinese contract

SMALL BUSINESS
PHILIP HOPKINS

Not many Victorian companies find themselves in Asia at the centre of international politics.

The largest exhibition centre in China is being built on the island of Xiamen, between Shanghai and Hong Kong and directly opposite Taiwan.

It is a prestigious, \$US500 million (\$A783 million) development that is intended to show the best of mainland China to the "other China" just across the sea — and the contract to design most of the project was won by a young Melbourne architectural firm, Brearley Middleton.

What's more, the partners, James Brearley, 36, and Luke Middleton, 31, hardly needed to leave their South Melbourne office to snare the job. Despite the occasional frenetic dash to China, the work for the project has been conducted entirely over the Internet.

Its winning design combines motifs from traditional Chinese Taoist and Buddhist philosophy with more typical big development elements such as hotels, marinas and sporting facilities. Renewable energy is also one of its most noteworthy features.

Xiamen, one of six special economic zones in the south, is being developed as a leading tourism and business centre, a gateway to the world. "With its beaches and rocky outcrops, it's a bit like the 'Bio' of China," Mr Brearley said. "It is a clean city and a new airport makes it very accessible."

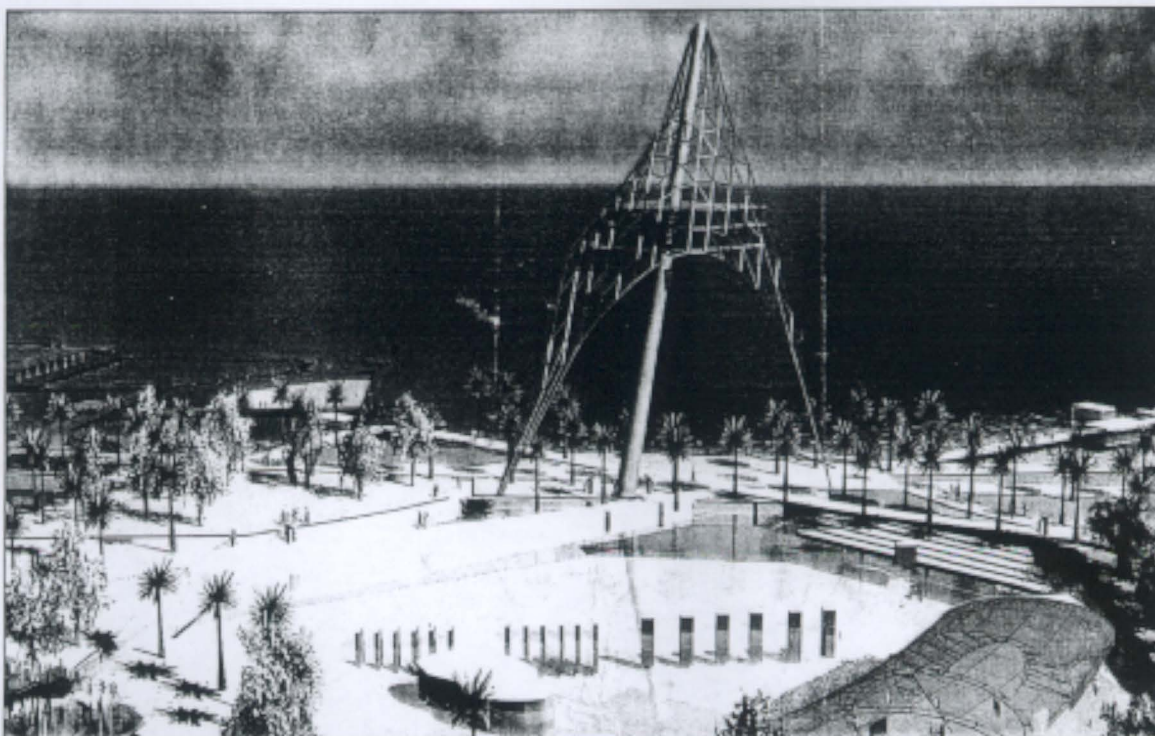
The project, already under way, is being built on 46 hectares of reclaimed land. The nearest Taiwanese island is only four kilometres off the coast, the main island about 60 kilometres away. "There is much Taiwanese investment in this part of China," Mr Middleton said.

The central exhibition building itself has been designed by a Canadian firm, but Brearley Middleton has got the rest — a large public square in front of the building that can cater for 50,000 people, and a parkland area almost the size of the Melbourne Botanical Gardens.

The "big ticket" items in the project include an 85-metre arched viewing tower with restaurant and observatory that looks towards Taiwan; a viewing screen 70 metres long and 38 metres wide; a 300-room hotel; an underground car park; and a marina and wharf.

However, it is the environmental aspects of the project that make it so distinctive.

Evaporation tanks convert seawater into fresh water; a series of turbines create wind energy as a power source; two 800-metre-long channels act as natural wetlands that purify water for re-use; and rainwater is collected from the site and stored in the canal system. Solar collectors will be installed on the



BM's winning design combines motifs from traditional Chinese Taoist and Buddhist philosophy with marinas and modern facilities

giant screen. Plants that have low water needs are used in the gardens, and the plantings have also been placed to minimise the impact of wind.

Mr Middleton said it had been important to bring Chinese elements to the design, and not just do a standard business park.

Mr Brearley said the Chinese judges had wanted something Western but, steeped in Taoism and Buddhism themselves, they had been extremely impressed by the Chinese elements in the design.

"They also thought that the way we interpreted it was completely contemporary and had the appearance of what they wanted — newness ... something that would launch them into the new century."

The design emphasises the public open space and public open parkland. "The elements we incorporated didn't turn their back on things. Others designed the site with traditional Hawaii-style hotels looking into a private area," Mr Middleton said.

The exhibition building itself, designed by the Canadians, is Confucian in its order and hierarchy, a European interpretation of Chinese architecture.

"We have tried to free the site around the building. We have done that by matching unstructured open



James Brearley and Luke Middleton: Frenetic. PHOTO: JOHN WOLSTRA.

space in the urban half of the site," Mr Brearley said. "The other half, the landscape, is cellular and compartmentalised. We have made 60 identical but unequal parts, a difference in sameness, a modern mathematical pattern that is non-hierarchical and not organic, which allows for every piece to be different without affecting the whole."

The landscaped area is also undulating, creating a wave-like effect in what is flat, reclaimed land.

The two main water bodies on each side bring the sea experience back into the site and, being wider at

the sea end, create an expansive viewing corridor. There are paths that link side streets, freeing up the site and making access easier.

Both men are products of the RMIT architectural school, but have brought other skills to their work: Mr Brearley has a masters degree in urban design from Melbourne University, and Mr Middleton a degree in construction management from RMIT and Melbourne University.

They heard about the international competition for the Xiamen project last November from a Shanghai friend who was in Melbourne

doing a doctorate. On the basis of their portfolio — the firm had won several awards in its first couple of years of existence — they got to a long list of 30, and then to a short list of nine against architects from China, France, America and Canada.

A full-blown design and model with accompanying detailed drawings, had to be produced in about two months, with Christmas between. After a frenetic dash to China and two sleepless days, the submission was handed in.

It has been a collaborative effort; consultant, Stephen Whitford, was an instrumental part of the team and 10 landscape-architecture firms from Melbourne have contributed.

The firm has expanded its own staff from six or seven to 20, including five Chinese-speaking staff, and has changed premises.

"In a sense, Melbourne's culture of architecture has won this project. We had to bring together a lot of people very quickly," Mr Brearley said. "The institutions are so good here, and the teaching, the passion and commitment to design is strong."

The whole project is expected to take two years to build; the Chinese construction teams work seven days a week and three shifts a day. "Money goes a lot further in China than here," Mr Middleton said.