

Big in China

It may be the largest architectural commission ever seen in New Zealand. The giant headquarters of a Chinese fashion giant have consumed Kiwi architect Fred Van Brandenburg, and should underline his reputation, writes Peter Feeney.

RISING FROM THE bare earth of a construction site in Shenzhen, China, is the giant new global headquarters of the international fashion giant Marisfrolg. On completion in 2017, the 120,000-square metre complex will encompass a catwalk and function area for launching collections, rooftop gardens, design offices, a factory, warehousing and a 50-room boutique hotel – all set in five hectares of garden, with ponds that capture water for re-use. Extraordinarily, this behemoth was all designed in Queenstown, and refined in Dunedin, making it perhaps New Zealand's largest-ever architectural commission. Since 2007, first in design, then in construction, Architects Van Brandenburg have worked solely on Marisfrolg, until recently turning down all other work.

Incomplete, yet elegant, it resembles the outsize bones of some extinct beast. Certainly, it doesn't look very practical. But, says principal architect Fred Van Brandenburg, "this is a sculpture people can reside in". It's a mark of the impact Van Brandenburg has made since arriving

in New Zealand in 1987. He gave up a successful career in apartheid-run South Africa to immigrate, a decision that came at a cost as emigrants were unable to take their assets with them. Penniless, Van Brandenburg and his wife Diane, four children in tow, arrived just in time for the 1987 stockmarket crash. Out of the resultant dearth of architectural commissions he emerged – largely by fluke, as he gleefully admits – the last architect standing from an initial group of three who tendered for the design of the Millbrook resort in Queenstown.

Van Brandenburg went on to work on iconic resort designs such as Huka Lodge and Wharekauhau in the Wairarapa, working in the then-distinctive Van Brandenburg style: buildings that paid historical homage to the early settlers, blending in with, rather than upstaging, their picturesque surroundings.

But years of commercial success led, surprisingly, to a mid-life professional crisis. So Van Brandenburg took a gamble and changed tack, travelling to Spain in 2005 to learn from the example of the late Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi. Gaudi's mantra was that all forms in architecture should be derived from those found in



Old school: Fred Van Brandenburg and his son Damien build models of their designs in their Dunedin studio before a single brick is laid.

Photos: Nicola Feeney

nature, a principle that has since fuelled Van Brandenburg's professional renaissance.

It was around the same time that Madame Zhu Chongyun, Marisfrolg owner and China's leading fashion designer, popped in to Van Brandenburg's Queenstown office. She'd been on holiday and asked each five-star resort in which she stayed: "Who designed this?" Every answer pointed her to Van Brandenburg.

When she visited, he was steaming cardboard over the kitchen kettle to make his Gaudi-inspired mock-ups; his wife brought in scones. Zhu loved it all; Van Brandenburg, in his modest way, swept her off her architectural feet. She told him: "You must become my architect."

But he almost turned Zhu down. He was refusing all commissions while he stretched at the boundaries of his work; his new Dr Seuss-style visions, Van Brandenburg told Zhu, were very different from the places she'd just stayed.

So the Van Brandenburgs were rather surprised when 18 months later a summons came from southern China. Zhu showed them the land she had just acquired for her new headquarters. Again, Van Brandenburg warned that his approach had changed, but a trip to Barcelona persuaded Zhu to back his new style.

Fred's brief was brief: three Chinese characters meaning: "soaring", "unostentatious" and "permanence" and the direction: design first, budget second. "Zhu's well off," says Fred, "and used to people taking advantage of that. But we've never discussed money. It just lands in our account when we need it."

The office of Architecture Van Brandenburg is a humble subterranean rabbit warren of rooms in Dunedin's historic Clarion Building. Fred's son Damien is the lucky blighter who went straight from Auckland's Unitec to the job of a lifetime; another son, Luca, handles media.

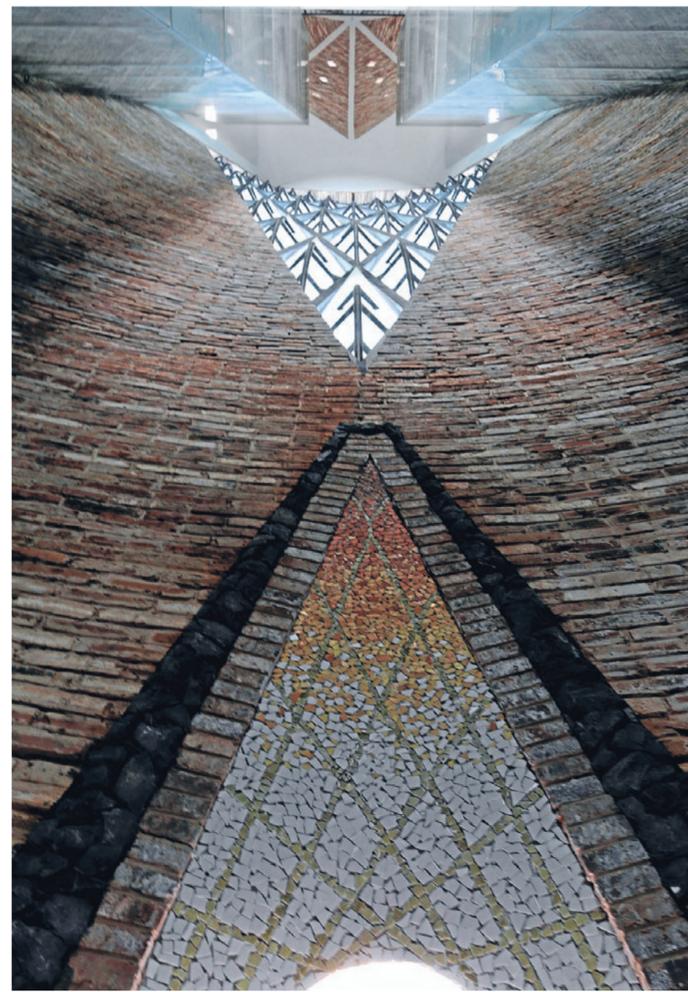
Only Fred and Damien are qualified architects; there's also a boat builder (handy when it comes to those curves), and the rest are product and interior designers. They toil at work tables making physical models, or over Macs building virtual ones. In another space larger-scale models are put together; 3D printers churn out design pieces. Every part of the Marisfrolg project is made here first – just rather smaller.

"Fundamental geometry is strictly adhered to," explains Van Brandenburg. "What we do may look expensive and impractical, but it's actually not. It's not over the top, cost-wise, at all." He's not big on glass, marble, and chrome. "This design is finished with stone, recycled bricks and ceramics."

Fred Van Brandenburg visits China every month to check on progress. Damien Van Brandenburg and his team work sometimes just one step ahead of the builders, designing everything to scale, right down to minutiae such as door handles, flying over working models as well as plans. This hands-on approach, they say, has removed the animosity that can characterise relationships between architects and the builders tasked with turning their architectural flights of fancy into fact.

Models are at the heart of the process. "Most architects do models when they have finished the design, as a presentation tool," Van Brandenburg says. "We reverse that."

Many were dusted off early this year and taken to the Venice Biennale, where Architecture Van Brandenburg is



exhibiting until November 23.

He has since been asked to exhibit in Istanbul for three months, where Van Brandenburg will give lectures and run workshops. He's also been invited to Oxford, Marseilles and the 2015 prestigious Milan Expo. Italian sculptor Lorenzo Quinn (son of actor Anthony Quinn) wants to exhibit in the 2015 Venice Art Biennale with Van Brandenburg. When Van Brandenburg

was first invited to Venice he was reluctant: "I knew how much work and expense it would be." Then he got over himself. "I realised I wanted to show what Kiwis can achieve globally – without leaving home."

Now, as the exhibition nears its close, he freely admits it's been a career highlight: "The accolades from our 8000-plus visitors has been – almost embarrassingly – over the top."

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