

Brand buildings: Australian architects feel double-edged sword of 'brand'

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Ed Billson plans to merge his Hong Kong-based practice, MAP Architecture, with a firm that will give it access to larger projects.

Photo: Luis Ascui

Ed Billson is in talks to sell his firm. He wants to merge his Hong Kong-based practice, MAP Architecture, with a bigger firm that will give it access to larger projects – those worth \$US50 million (\$56 million) and upwards – in China proper.

If it's a brand-new phase for MAP, the firm Billson co-founded 10 years ago, it is also a phase of new brand. That is because, in his profession, branding is something that needs to be applied with skill and precision. It's not a nice-to-have. It is crucial.

Architecture is a very difficult business and branding really is everything," Melbourne-born Billson tells *BRW* during a trip back to the city.

“The bigger brand name would give us access to bigger projects. It’s a long, slow process to build a brand and then build it to have the credibility to start bigger projects.”

Brand – the personality of a product or service any company provides – is significant in design and in the products architects create for clients. Apple’s retail stores are a good example. The design says a great deal about the underlying product or service.

But branding is also becoming something for architects themselves to manage. Rock stars of the profession like Richard Rogers and Zaha Hadid have been doing so for years, but they are not the only ones. The challenge is growing for architects to know how to use and manage their brand.

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“Brand equity is a huge part of businesses,” says Andrea Nixon, a former architect who runs branding consultancy Nixon Counsel. “Is Australian architecture on the front foot of that? I would say not. Are they recognising the need for brand to be part of the business? I think they are.”

The architect age

More than a decade has passed in Australia since residential developers started seeing the benefit of selling apartments based on good-quality design that they could link to a specific architect, according to Sydney-based Andrew Nimmo. “They have discovered what architects have always wanted to believe – that good architecture is good business, that a ‘name’ architect will not just help sell the apartments quicker, but at a higher premium,” Nimmo wrote in a 2001 article for *Architecture Bulletin*, the journal of the NSW Institute of Architects.

“Beyond the fashionable aspect of the marketing, the portrayed lifestyle includes many positive attributes for architecture and the city. It implies a new understanding of the street, where café culture and street activity combined with mixed-use buildings are recognised as enriching the urban experience.

“There is also an acceptance that design is a holistic affair that ties together the building and the interior as a conceptual idea.”

The trend grows – and then twists

This tendency has increased – to the extreme – in recent years as wealthy Asian, principally Chinese, buyers have bought up residential property in Australia. To woo wealthy foreigners to the top end of the property ladder, developers have gone for big-name architects – as in the case of the [Norman Foster-designed Lumiere apartment building](#) in the Sydney CBD – rather than local names.

The intervening 12 years have also, however, seen a twisting of the practice of architect branding. Some commercially savvy developers have become good at using the brand of an architect like wallpaper, slapping it over shoddy design to make a cheap product pricier, Nimmo now says.

“Many good architects are complaining that they are used by the developers to prepare a design up to development approval stage, and then a so-called ‘documentation architect’ is used to complete the project,” he says.

“In these cases the reputation of the architect is used to pacify council and get an approval. Then, as soon as the approval is received, the developer either on-sells the land or a new architect is engaged to reduce costs.”

Branding in architecture has traditionally followed the same route as law, where founding partners put their surnames in a plaque on the front door.

Not all do that, however, and that includes Billson’s Hong Kong firm. When he, Karl Grebstad and Samuele Martelli started their company in April 2004, they shied away from the traditional practice.

“It’s a clear message to your staff that it’s all about you,” Billson says.

The firm started off as Metropolitan Architecture and Planning, but has been known for most of the past 10 years as MAP. Its recent work has been intimately concerned with clients’ branding.

Möet-Hennessy on the MAP

MAP recently designed a new winery for Möet-Hennessy, the liquor arm of French luxury-goods company LVMH. To tap the fast-growing Chinese market, the company wanted to build its own winery in China's northern wine-growing region of Ningxia.

"It's in a desert and is basically an oasis," Billson says.

The local Chinese winemakers are all building themselves French chateau-style wineries, some of them better than others. Some of them are atrocious.

Möet-Hennessy's business is all about creating and managing brands, and it was keen to come up with a winery design that was consistent with its brand. The rage among local wineries was to build faux chateaux and there was an expectation that the owner of iconic French brands such as Krug and Dom Pérignon would do the same.

"The local Chinese winemakers are all building themselves French chateau-style wineries, some of them better than others," Billson says. "Some of them are atrocious. But that is what the Chinese expected us to do. And they were looking forward to seeing how it was done."

Instead, however, MAP went with a new design that incorporated features of the local landscape – including a wall that depicted the undulating surface of the vineyard in winter, when vines are cut back and buried under soil to protect them from the heavy winter layer of snow. The design is consistent with the tastes of the company's target market, he says.

"The Chinese and the younger generation of Chinese – those getting into the command generation now – they want to see the new 'new' thing," Billson says.

"They want to see the cutting edge. They want to be challenged. The educated ones are not interested in kitsch, they're not interested in European, they want to see cutting-edge, modern architecture."

Branding works both ways

While China's growing middle-class consumption offers a chance for a firm like Billson's to create a niche for itself as a designer of wineries – it previously worked on a distillery for a Chinese white spirit label that Möet-Hennessy acquired – the point of difference Billson is seeking to sell MAP on is its Hong Kong location and links.

He is in talks with a large New York-based practice – he declines to name it – that handles big projects but has not been able to win jobs in the former colony itself or in the lucrative and fast-growing Pearl River Delta, the densely urbanised mainland region adjacent to Hong Kong.

“They have admitted to me that they cannot win work in Hong Kong or the Pearl River Delta,” Billson says. “There's a big black hole where they are just not competitive. And I was saying to them: ‘That's what I'm offering you! We are in Hong Kong. We have worked for all of the blue-chip developers here and we are your in.’”

But for Billson, the branding game could play out very differently. Tying up with the New York firm may not be the only route to larger projects.

Expansion could also come through acquisition by a large Chinese design firm, or local design institute (LDI), as they are known. This happened earlier this year when [China Construction Design International acquired Sydney-based PTW Architects](#).

Bye-bye New York, hi LDI?

If this were to happen to MAP, Billson wouldn't be looking to ride the larger firm's brand into the big projects. Rather, an LDI, with its existing links to large developers in China, would use MAP's brand to win more work.

“They would be looking at us for the strength of our brand, in terms of offering design excellence in architecture and interior design and master-planning,” he says.

“The play would be that we would spearhead their design effort and we would win work because they will know the developers and the developers will be comfortable to go with us because they will see that we will give them good design products.”

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