

Design adopts lotus position

A flower inspires an exhibition centre in China, **Stephen Crafti** reports.

INCREASINGLY, Australian architects are making their mark in Asia.

One practice, Studio 505, has been working in Asia since 2005, initially designing the World Expo Pavilion in Japan, with local artist Geoff Nees.

After that project they designed an aluminium skin for a building covering more than 22,000 square metres.

Designed like a crescent, their "screen" extended over 1.6 kilometres.

More recently Studio 505 has created the Lotus Exhibition Centre, in Wujin, China. Expected to be completed early next year, the Lotus Exhibition Centre comprises three overscaled lotus-shaped buildings on a lake.

Studio 505's client, Mr Li, the director of the Planning Bureau for Wujin, simply requested the architects "do something beautiful".

"It's important to attract investment to the city, but our brief was also to design a cultural hub," says the architect, Dylan Brady, who worked closely on the project with his co-director, the architect Dirk Zimmermann.

Said Mr Zimmerman: "It wasn't a prescriptive brief.

But Mr Li saw this new venue as a linchpin in this cultural precinct."

Mr Zimmerman, Mr Brady and their team are also working on the adjacent arts centre.

Originally, there was a two-storey angular glazed pavilion on the site. Built in the 1990s, it was already showing signs of wear.

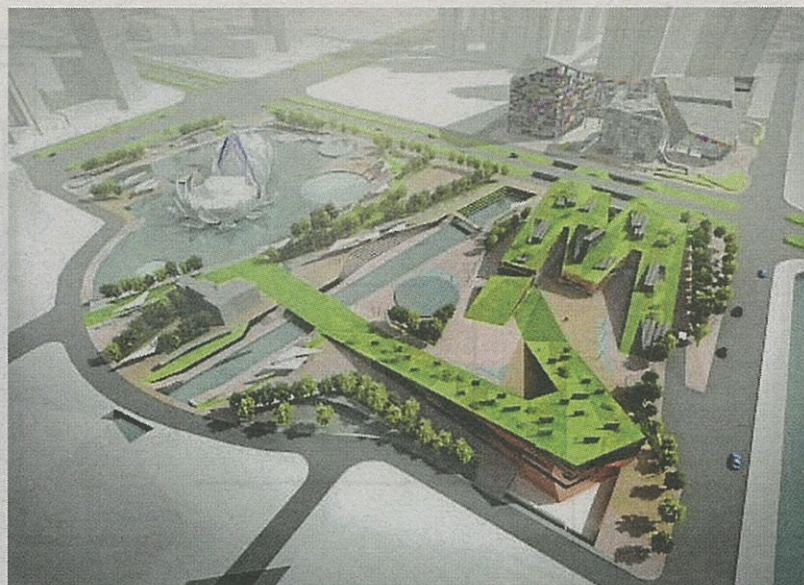
While the two upper-glazed floors were removed, the basement levels were integrated in Studio 505's scheme.

One of Wujin's slogans, "where the flowers open", initially sparked the idea of lotus flowers for the building's form.

The form also seemed to resonate with the shallow lake where the buildings were to be placed.

The architects conceived three lotus flowers, one being a closed central "bud". And on one side of this bud are two stages of flowering, from a full ripe flower bud, to an open bloom revealing a seed pod inside.

While these over-scaled buds, extending up to 32 metres in height, appear delicate from a distance, each petal is rigorously constructed in steel, with the



"Do something beautiful" was the architects' brief for the Lotus Exhibition Centre, in Wujin.

"veins" of each petal left open to allow for natural light. Beneath this skin is a building, clad in white "tencadis" tiling, a system of exterior tiling adopted by the renowned Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi.

'Our brief was also to design a cultural hub.'

The combination of gloss and matt white tiles used to clad the centre's exterior create a light ethereal design. The architects also used

purple tiles where the building connects with the water, to further create a floating effect. One of the earliest responses to Studio 505's scheme was to ask "Do the petals move?"

Given the weight of the petals, each several tonnes, the answer is no. But as people engage with the three stages of the lotus, from closed to fully opened, there is a sense of motion.

"They will appear to move in people's minds, even though each element is fixed," says Mr Zimmerman.

To further animate the Lotus Exhibition Centre, the architects have conceived a

lighting show, with the buds continually changing in colour from purple to pink and magenta. Studio 505 has also designed interiors befitting such a building.

Three exhibition spaces, a VIP room, conference rooms, and an outdoor terrace are included in one of the buds and beautifully capture the language of the lotus flower.

Even the fuschia carpet in the main entry spine casts a reddish hue on the glazed tiles. "The brief didn't call for a blank white box," says Mr Brady, who has recently set up an office in Wujin. "They wanted something that spoke their language."