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By Mary Scoviak

Billion Dollar Man

Michael Hong is grabbing big-ticket work from architectural giants.

If you had just launched your own architecture practice and clients offered you multi-billion dollar commissions from Las Vegas to Nassau, would you say no? Michael Hong did – twice. “I didn’t see how I could handle projects of this scope. My ‘firm’ consisted of me and a graduate student working on a consulting basis. We didn’t even have a proper office; we were working out of my house,” says Hong.

Persistence bested Hong’s reservations. He launched Michael Hong Associates (mha) in 2004 with Las Vegas legend Steve Wynn’s

\$2.2 billion Encore Suites project and the Caribbean’s largest single-phase resort development, Baha Mar Resort, on his drawing boards.

Although mha is a start-up, Hong is a known quantity. His relationship with Wynn began in the mid-1990s when Hong was a 34-year-old project designer with Jerde Partnership in Venice, Calif. Wynn had approached world-renowned “experience architect” Jon Jerde with an idea that would knock the themed kitsch out of Las Vegas. Hong “got it,” immersed himself in classical Italian architecture and presented

Wynn with the luxurious, villa-inspired 3,993-room/suite Bellagio Las Vegas (ranked as one of the world’s most profitable hotels).

Over the next 14 years, Hong’s “strong sensitivity to good design and taste” established him as a major contributor to Wynn’s exterior architectural evolution, according to Deruyter Butler, executive vp, Wynn Design & Development, Las Vegas. “Mike can solve the most complicated, unusual aesthetic problems. He brings innovative concepts to a very competitive marketplace.”

Hong’s 19 years with Jerde proved he could



“I’m known for macro projects,
but I see myself as a craftsman.” MICHAEL HONG



coax elegant order out of multi-use chaos across asset classes, including Salt Lake City's 3.2 million-square-foot retail/business Gateway district, and around the world with headline projects such as Wynn's \$1.6 billion Bellagio Resort in Las Vegas. So it was no surprise that when Hong launched his own firm in 2004, mha was Wynn's first choice for the 2.2 million-square-foot, multi-billion-dollar Encore Suites casino/hotel/entertainment complex slated for a December debut on the Las Vegas Strip.

Encore's complexity makes it an ideal "first project" to showcase mha's strengths. Not only does the exterior architecture have to live up to the luxury standards of the neighboring Wynn Las Vegas (the world's only casino resort with both a Mobil Five Star and AAA Five Diamond rating), but it also has to unify diverse, distinct destinations: seven dining outlets, 2,034 luxury suites, 64,000 square feet of casino space, 80,000 square feet of meeting and convention space, plus entertainment venues, a salon and spa, a nightclub and various pools.

It's the creative process of finding the right links to tie together multiple usages that draws Hong to large-footprint projects. "It's not about the components; it's about the mix," he says. "Architects used to stitch together all the pieces with the theme du jour. Now, the aim is to

above | mha throws guests some interesting curves as they enter the world of Baha Mar Casino and Resort, Nassau. **below left** | Indoor/outdoor fusion provides an immersive thread that unifies the 1,000-acre Baha Mar resort.

combine timeshare, restaurants, retail, entertainment, casinos, spas – whatever – into a synergistic whole that people won't simply inhabit, but will enjoy."

Nature and authenticity are the new reference points for mha's work. Encore is defined by trees, colors and textures. Another massive project, the 1,000-acre Baha Mar Resorts development in Nassau, takes inspiration from the provocative and organic artwork of Andrew Goldsworthy. (Despite the fact that Harrah's Entertainment terminated its side of the joint venture, Baha Mar Resorts says this project will go forward.)

"Architecture will be less about city style and more about natural, timeless beauty," says Hong. The trend is toward layering architectural elements and framing views. "Architecture should make the guest say, 'There's something different here, something unique, something I want to experience,'" he adds.

To produce that effect in projects now under way and proposals for future work, Hong is

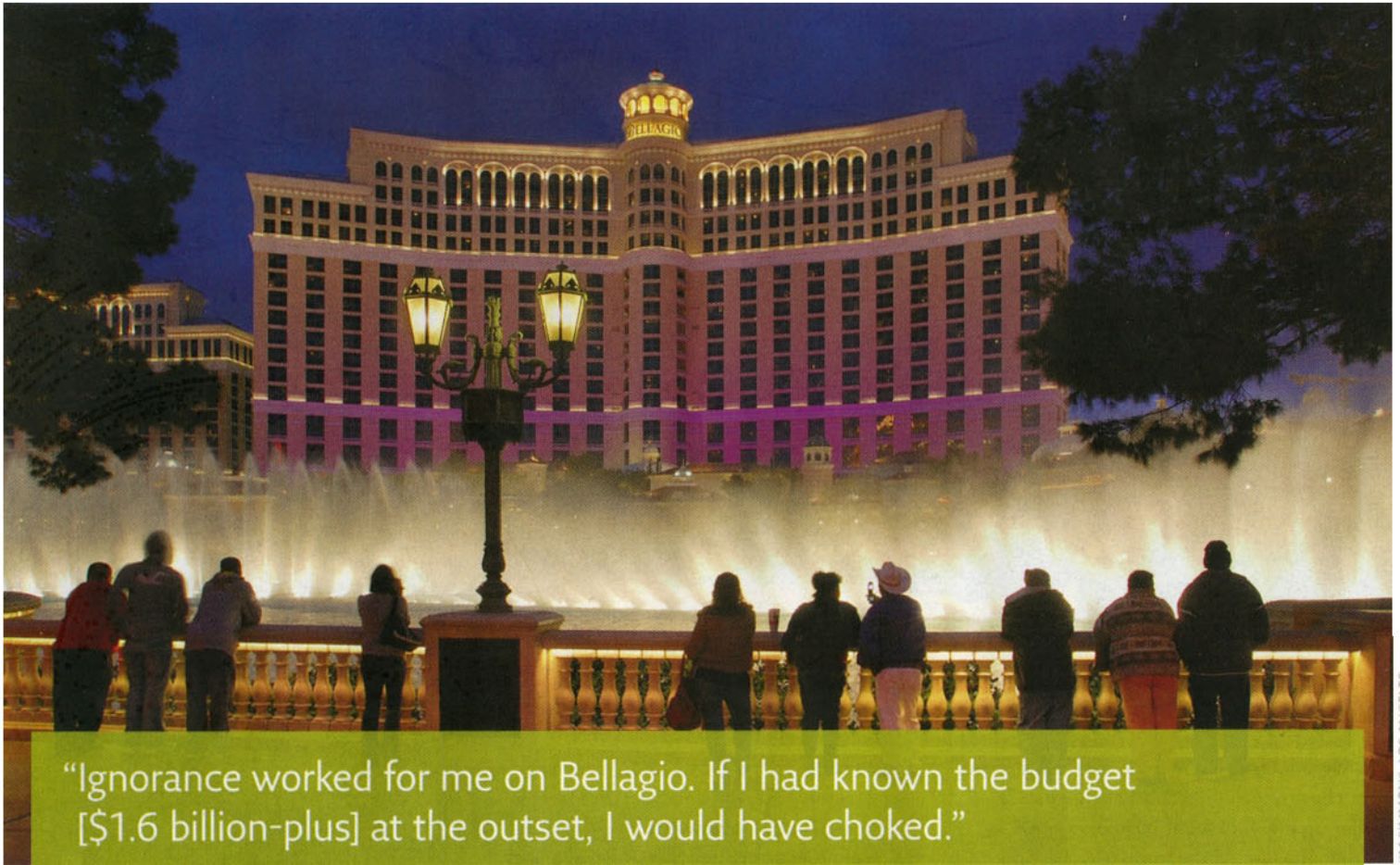
Not-Quite Vital Stats

ON LEAVING THE "NEST": "I was doing a lot of large projects [for Jerde Partnership]. The work felt more like it was about the business of architecture, and that was keeping me from pursuing my passion," says Hong.

WHAT CHALLENGES HIM: Staffing. He is not finding many young architects who can do it all, a skill he himself has proudly honed. "This generation is trained to specialize," he says. Going with that flow, he built a 14-member staff of talented up-and-comers with complementary skills.

HOW HE ESCAPES: "Unless I'm with my family, I don't." His bedside reading is mainly Adobe and AutoCAD manuals. "I guess I'm a nerd. I love technology. These programs allow me to add movement and color to my presentations. With traditional mock-ups, the client sees only the shell. Now we can create a virtual model with the spaces, colors, even fabrics in place. We're showing the whole project, not just the elevations."

name drop



“Ignorance worked for me on Bellagio. If I had known the budget [\$1.6 billion-plus] at the outset, I would have choked.”

above | Initially, Hong was assigned to design only the entry to Bellagio. But his classically referenced villa concept proved to be the right platform for Steve Wynn's new vision of Las Vegas.

right | The curve of the atrium's arch and the palazzo play on the villa theme.

using indigenous stone to create richness with a sense of place. Precious materials show up sparingly, like jewels, rather than cladding every surface in marble or rigging lobbies with cordons of crystal chandeliers. More and more, color differentiates his projects.

A greener world is shaping interior flow, as well. Hong dismisses the buzz about “new” gathering spaces: “Ian Schrager is the father of boutique hotels with communal space. He did that in the 1980s.” What is new in the resort world is a further blurring of indoor/outdoor space. “It’s important to create appealing connections so that guests will want to explore all of the property’s amenities, not be trapped in their rooms,” he says. “Then, everything becomes a revenue generator.” **HSI**



JIM SIMMONS, LOS ANGELES