

David Simpson and Michael Start are virtual celebrities in Beijing these days. The principals of DFS Smith Carter Architects & Engineers in Joint Venture are finding their faces plastered on Chinese billboards and magazine back covers. They give ultimate credit for the attention — for themselves and their unique housing development project — to Dr. Henry Norman Bethune, whose folk-hero status among the Chinese has made Canadians, and things Canadian, welcome in China.

Norman Bethune, a Canadian medical doctor who lived, and died, in China in the late 1930s, trained thousands of Chinese to be medics and saved lives

called the Rose Garden. Work on the master plan began in August 2000 and is nearly complete. Construction on



Unique housing project in Beijing

Building on Bethune

with the mobile blood transfusion unit he invented.

"Canadians owe a big debt of gratitude to Dr. Bethune," says Simpson. "When I'm introduced as a Canadian to Chinese people, often their first words are 'Norman Bethune.' He's our Ambassador for Canada."

Firms behind famous Canadian buildings

The joint-venture partners have been teaming up for projects for the past six years. Their respective individual companies are behind many famous Canadian buildings.

DFS Inc. Architects, with 32 employees in offices in Montreal and Saint John, is renowned for designs such as Ottawa's Chateau Laurier, while Winnipeg-based Smith Carter Architects & Engineers Inc., with nearly 100 employees, has designed many Canadian embassies.

The joint-venture firm's most recent offshore contract is with a private Beijing developer for the design of a master plan for a wealthy subdivision,

the first five houses is expected to be finished by spring 2001, and 250 more are expected by the end of the year.

Unique blend of West and East

The houses are a unique mingling of Canadian technology with the ancient Oriental principles of feng shui, the practice of balancing the invisible lines of energy (chi) in the environment thought to influence the course and quality of life.

The house exteriors will reflect a North American, in particular Canadian, appearance, and will incorporate technology — vapour barrier, building envelope, central air conditioning and heating — previously unheard of in Beijing.

While Canadian technology is an obvious selling point, it is not the sole reason the architects' faces are being publicized. "While it's a little unnerving seeing our pictures in the media, I realize we're also here for our marketability as Canadians," says Simpson. "Western lifestyle is very popular right now among educated and well-off Chinese."

Bridging the cultural gap

Despite their marketability, the Canadians nevertheless have had a huge cultural gap to bridge, particularly in developing business relations. Fortuitously, in that regard, both architectural firms have in their employ architects fluent in both Mandarin and English.

"Between us, we have four Mandarin-speaking employees," explains Simpson. "Their involvement in the negotiations has substantially increased the confidence of our client. Most of the trust we've earned has been through their ability to speak frankly about us and our capabilities."

Evidence of how strong that trust is becoming is the number of introductions the Canadians are receiving from their Beijing developer. "As a result of our delivering on our contract, our client is introducing us to his friends and associates," says Simpson. "There are spin-offs all over the place."

Team Canada enhances credibility

The partners have also benefited from joining the recent Team Canada

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