

Top of the ROC Based in Taiwan, the design firm suitably called Xrange makes strides in every medium.

By Barbara Hanagan Portrait by Marc Gerritsen

Why Taiwan? To understand why one couple—Grace Cheung, 39, and Royce YC Hong, 38—founded a 10-person design firm called Xrange on the tip of that island, you have to know where they've already been, and where their host nation is going. The answer will reveal how great opportunities can come from places way off the design map, especially if the gifted, remarkably prodigious partners are anxious to take on a wide geography of disciplines and commissions, from phones to land planning. (Hence the name Xrange, a mathematical term meaning unlimited scope.)





But first, two more questions: Where and what is Taiwan?

The democratic Republic of China (ROC) is the Holland-size land mass of 23 million people floating between Japan and the Philippines, just a strait away from the real China (the only UN-sanctioned one, anyway): the People's Republic of China (PRC), which for decades has been trying to reclaim it.

Exotic as it may look from the air, with its tropical-to-snowy landscape of mountain ranges dotted by dormant volcanoes, Taiwan is a fast-growing industrial country that pioneered the integrated-circuit chip, makes lots of LCD panels and other electronic components, and does plenty of business with China and the rest of Asia.

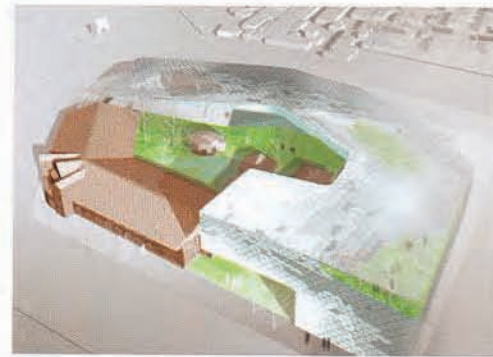
The Taiwanese tend to have a special affection for innovation. They not only speed new technologies into their daily lives, but they also file about as many U.S. patents, per million people, as Americans do. And lately, Taiwan's government has decided to boost the "culture industry," as they call it—just as they've subsidized high-tech start-ups—in order to support business with design.

For Xrange, "it's the chaos," says Hong, that inspires. And you have to work in Taiwan—preferably in their funky old quarter of Taipei, where a neighbor's pet pig holds court on a sidewalk one block from the presidential palace—to experience the pace of life.

"Chaotic is invigorating," agrees Cheung, who likes the "organic" Italian-style traffic, the land-use clashes where construction often outstrips zoning, and the bustling new shopping complexes that look deceptively bland. "Inside a generic mall here, the electronics are laid out like cosmetics counters, and there's a Muji store," she says.

By contrast, "North America is very well laid out and a bit conservative, so the chances of accidents happening are





not that great," says Cheung, who was born in Malaysia, immigrated to Canada as a child, got a master's in architecture at Columbia, and worked for OMA Asia in Hong Kong.

Hong, a Taiwan native, earned degrees in industrial design and graphics at RISD and Art Center College of Design, respectively. He worked in Japan before returning to Taipei for a commission. With Cheung, he decided to ride the rapid growth of Asia comfortably outside the "stress of Japan...the high land costs of Hong Kong...and the craziness of [mainland] China," he says.

There's plenty to do right there on their island: master-planning city and countryside, designing the envisioned buildings-of-all-scales, and doing interiors, furniture, lighting, and electronic products inside. "In Taiwan, there's a real hunger for something good that could really change things," Cheung says. "It's very different from 10 years ago." Even residential clients equate innovation with cachet.

Xrange thrives on accidents and surprises. In fact, that's how the firm was founded three years ago. The two principals had no intention of setting up an office, let alone a multidisciplinary one, until 2003, when they won first prize for a conceptual entry sent to a design contest.

More opportunities came from Hong's early relationship with Taiwan's largest internet portal, PChome. Starting out as its third hire, Hong rose to creative director. Then, when PChome partnered with Skype, the internet phone company, to create a line of consumer electronics called IPEVO, Xrange became that brand's strategists, designers, and shareholders. Now Hong is also CEO of IPEVO. The initial product, a corded Skype USB phone model, FREE-1, led to more iterations including the XING conference phone.

Xrange might have used its corporate success to stay in the electronics game. Instead, the firm is moving in the opposite direction, favoring low-tech, hand-made one-offs fabricated with methods the designers can understand and shape. Architecture is what they're practicing most devotedly at the moment. (The firm continues to draw up smart, elegant planning projects for Taiwan, but they're not as fun to read about.)

So, for the moment, Xrange will be known for its houses. There are only two to speak of right now—one built, another under construction. Each starts with a strong hier-

archy of concepts and follows it all the way through, from siting to fittings.

The Ant Farm House in Taipei began as a faux renovation. Unable to demolish a stone house on protected parkland, Xrange scooped out the insides and wrapped a steel-framed shell around the "found interior," as the designers call it. The shell creates lateral bracing for the stone walls while forming a maze-like series of tall and deep rooms in the space between the two structures. Glinting in the sun, the mysterious black exterior looks like stone, but it's a local fake-stone paint made of real mineral powder and polymer. "Actually, we were hoping for asphalt," Cheung admits.

Also in Taipei, a residence is being built for a young couple—a former conductor and an oboist—who wanted a home full of music. Xrange answered with another house-within-a-house. On a small urban parcel, the six-story steel-and-block structure, tapered by zoning codes, will enclose a tall, wood music box: a vertical atrium containing two concert pianos and a music library. Inside, the owners can play together or invite friends to concerts on the miniature stadium seating. By "tuning" its elaborate walnut louvers, the musicians can not only make music in this space, but also shape its trajectory through the house.

At press time, Xrange had just won the commission to design a Museum of Speed "on a prominent historical site where the first Ching Dynasty railway originated, and where the new High-Speed Rail enters the city of Taipei today," Cheung says. The architecture, which will "embrace and enclose" six historical monuments, including a World War II bunker, will have a "sweeping form, a shroud of 'graduated' mass evoking imageries of a speeding gush of air," she adds. In three years, Xrange has not only completed more wildly diverse and complex commissions than many firms do (or don't do) in a decade, but they have fulfilled them with the rarest of design attributes. Good ideas, done well. Bilingually. ★

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this page Xrange recently won a commission to design and build the Museum of Speed on a historical site in Taipei. The pair intend to shroud six historical monuments with an undulating skin evocative of a surging gust of wind.