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Gafcon partnering on \$12B development in Shanghai



Rendering courtesy of Gafcon, Inc.

Zizhu Purple Bay will develop a veritable city within a city in Shanghai, according to program manager Gafcon, Inc.

By Mark Armao

Gafcon, Inc. has worked on some big projects.

The San Diego-based firm assisted in the \$2 billion expansion of a Disney resort in Anaheim and is part of the team planning the \$1.2 billion redevelopment of Seaport Village.

But an ongoing "megaproject" in Shanghai is the firm's largest undertaking to date, said Gafcon founder and CEO Yehudi "Gaf" Gaffen.

Spanning 3,200 acres along the Huangpu River, Zizhu Purple Bay is a roughly \$12 billion master-planned development that will contain a 900-acre residential community and an 800-acre business, technology and university hub, as well as myriad retail, entertainment, hospitality, health care, recreation and educational facilities.

"It's more than a neighborhood," Gaffen said. "It's more like a city within a city. I think it's going to have its own quality of life and its own design parameters that are intended to be unique and different from the rest of Shanghai."

While Gaffen's current focus is Seaport San Diego - a project that will reimagine 70 acres along the Central Embarcadero - he is working alongside project executive Jeff Causey to collaborate with Zizhu, a privately held Chinese development firm, to iron out the design goals of the Shanghai project's \$6.5 billion second phase.

The Seaport San Diego project was actually the catalyst for the unlikely partnership, Gaffen said. Executives from Zizhu were attending a local real estate conference last summer when they saw the plans for Seaport San Diego, which were developed by the Gaffen-led partnership known as Protea Waterfront Development.

The Shanghai firm retained Gafcon to perform program and design management for part of Purple Bay's first phase, which will include 328 "yacht homes," an active marina and a network of canals, bridges, and green spaces, Causey said.

Although waterfront townhomes may be a familiar sight in Southern California, Causey said, the model is relatively unheard of in China's urban areas.

"They are typically used to high-rise residential living, and they [generally] do not have single-family residences in China," said Causey, who worked as an architect in China and other Asian countries prior to joining Gafcon.

Causey said it is difficult for many Americans to "understand how many people there are in China. So to take this land and allow for [detached townhomes to be built] is a real turning point in the development over there."

The residences will range from about 1,500 to 1,800 square feet and were designed with layouts that adhere to many of the principles and practices of feng shui. As opposed to the American architectural custom of facing buildings away from the sometimes harsh sunlight from the south, the Chinese belief system embraces it.

"For them, everything wants to face south," Causey said. "So we would spend hours trying to align buildings so that their predominant faces are facing south."

In another nod to Chinese culture, many of the homes were designed to accommodate multi-generational households, Gaffen said.

The construction of a large man-made lake and the surrounding yacht homes will commence in the coming months. In addition to Purple Bay's residential program, a host of mixed-use components -- including hotels, schools and a 125,000-square-foot aquarium -- will be built as those projects are designed and receive the necessary approvals.

Because virtually all land in China is government-owned, Gaffen said the developer must go through the step-by-step process of "convincing the government that [the project] makes sense."

This week, the project team will travel to Shanghai to refine the design goals for Purple Bay's downtown commercial and business hub: InnoTown.

The district will include office towers and university buildings interspersed with retail, restaurants and entertainment. Causey said InnoTown will have a "college town" feel, where students and researchers in cutting-edge fields will brush shoulders with established executives and entrepreneurs.

The district will build on the foundation laid by the Zizhu National Hi-Tech Industrial Development Zone, an existing education and technology park that includes multiple universities and several big-name tech firms, including Microsoft and Intel.

To bring an American perspective to the district, Zizhu will draw on the expertise of the Gafcon-led team, which includes architect AVRP Skyport, McCullough Landscape Architecture, marine engineering firm Moffatt & Nichol and aquarium specialist OdySea.

"Working with the client, we're going to more strictly define the goals so we can begin the creative process of mingling the pieces together to create synergy between the college-education and business worlds," Causey said.

As the community rises over the next decade, subsequent phases will deliver the additional services and amenities required by the growing community, which is expected to eventually draw around 200,000 residents, students and commuters.

An underground transit hub and several subway stops are also planned for the area, which is about four miles south of The Bund, a historic waterfront district.

Purple Bay and InnoTown will be designed to encourage walking, biking and other alternative means of transportation to decrease vehicle traffic and air pollution, which has long plagued the city. Although smog still blankets the city at times, the city of Shanghai has taken significant steps to reduce pollution over the last two decades, Causey said.

And, as the face of China has changed, Causey said, cities like Shanghai have become more open to outside influences. At Purple Bay, the "experiential" nature of the community and its spaces will reflect the influence of the U.S.-based team, he said.

"As they reach out more from China to the rest of the world, I think that we're bringing things that are critically important from our side to them," Causey said. "Whether it's lifestyle and family or the education experience or the experience of nature - all of it intertwines together to create community."