Sprawling Thai temple project offers rare opportunity for architectural firm

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Even for an architect whose portfolio includes Genzyme Corp.’s Allston-lading plant and the dramatic Arco Forum at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, a Raynham project scheduled to get underway any day now stands out.

The Wat Nawamintraratchatis NMR Meditation Center will be big — about 110,000 square feet, covering about 5 acres on a parcel of 50 acres. Uses will range from worship to lodging. Craftsmen will travel more than 8,000 miles for certain portions of the job.

The Thai Buddhist temple and cultural center is in a sense a $50 million gift to honor King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, who was born in 1927 at Mount Auburn Hospital while his parents were in Boston so his father could attend Harvard Medical School.

Been Wang, a principal at Architectural Resources Cambridge, called the job “a once-in-a-lifetime” chance.

“Doing something like this is an opportunity to understand a new culture,” he said during a recent interview at the firm’s Kendall Square offices. “I find that fascinating.”

The undertaking, which backers said will result in the largest Thai Buddhist Temple outside Thailand, originated about six years ago, Wang says. Phra Promwachirayan, a Bangkok-based monk who oversees all the Thai Buddhist monks in the United States, was touring the Boston area surveying the region’s architecture. His mission was to find a site for a temple promised by a donor who to this day has kept his identity from the public.

As Wang tells the story, Phra Promwachirayan saw the Genzyme building at Allston Landing and directed his driver to stop. The abbot wanted to find out who had designed the structure, which was covered in brick — a large glass portion was added recently — but with lines that evoked Gothic architecture.

That conversation and others eventually led Phra Promwachirayan to Wang, who had arrived in Cambridge from his native Taiwan in 1974 to study at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. He was the principal architect on major buildings at Harvard, Tufts Medical School and Duke University, among other places.

A number of factors put him in position to meet Phra Promwachirayan, Wang said. “For years, I’ve been involved in all the Asian organizations here. And I myself am Buddhist, which is important.”

“I believe this is good karma,” he added. The temple itself will include worship space for about 700 people and various community rooms. Lodging for monks and visitors will be part of the complex, as will gardens so the monks can grow flowers and vegetables. A museum dedicated to the king and his family will occupy prominent space.

The complex, the site of a former horse farm at the intersection of routes 44 and 34, will be about four stories without its Chedi — the large steeple that sits atop Thai Buddhist temples. In Raynham, the peak of the Chedi will be about 187 feet from the ground. Lights placed strategically around the complex will illuminate it at night. The Federal Aviation Administration will not require a beacon, Wang said.

Most construction techniques will be typical for the region. For some parts of the work, craftsmen will visit from Thailand.

A few parts of the job will require special attention — for instance, how to get a 3.5-ton statue of the Buddha into the steel-framed building after completion.

“That will be an interesting challenge,” said Matthew Lewis, project manager on the job. After exploring a number of options, the design team settled on bringing the Buddha into the building in pieces, Wang said.

The abbot’s representative on the project is Paul Chapple of Paul Chapple Real Estate Development Inc. in Cambridge.

There were no religious rules governing the construction process, though certain considerations determined the dates on which work should commence.

The temple is set for completion in early 2013.

A rendering of the planned 110,000-square-foot Thai Buddhist temple in Raynham. Construction is expected to commence in the weeks ahead.

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