UK Trade & Investment commissioned MRC to run a design competition to find an innovative and creative design for the UK Pavilion at the Milan Expo 2015. The challenge: to invent a structure which represented a British take on the Expo theme, ‘Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life’. The spirit of the Expo was focused on visitor interaction and engagement; the design of the Pavilion needed to reflect and inform its content.

In branding the competition materials with a bee feeding on a flower, MRC distilled a series of complex messages to a single compelling image, and originated a ‘bee’ theme, which was realised in the winning design.

The competition brief set an ambitious objective: for the Pavilion to follow and equal the success of Thomas Heatherwick’s seed cathedral at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. The winner responded to the challenge: like the Shanghai project, the Milan Pavilion won the Expo Gold Medal – a double for MRC, who ran both competitions.

The two-stage, OJEU-compliant competition was launched within three weeks of appointment and kept to a strict timetable throughout. MRC supported the client throughout the process, wrote the design brief, managed the design teams, promoted the competition through a dedicated website, and co-ordinated a Technical Review.

Such was the quality of submissions that the envisaged shortlist of five was expanded to eight.

An impressive mix of creative skills from the architecture, engineering, art, design and agri-tech sectors produced a diverse and extremely creative set of responses. Proposals included the use of an edible strawberry cloud, a seawater greenhouse, and augmented reality software.

The winning design, by Wolfgang Buttress Studio in collaboration with BDP and Tristan Simmonds Studio, featured a ‘virtual beehive’ which glows and pulsates according to signals from a real hive.

The Pavilion proved a great popular success at the Expo drawing over three million visitors and winning eleven awards including the prestigious Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) Gold Medal for Architecture and Landscape. The Pavilion is on course to be the most visited paid British attraction worldwide for 2015.