The ideal design is one which has the optimal balance of advancement against risk achievable right now". That operator could be civil or military.

The current project is the HoverWing 20 vessel offering a 3t payload but it's anticipated that a 10t payload craft would be a reality within the next ten years.

These vessels are aimed at markets in coastal, inter-island, estuary and major rivers throughout the world, with the main regions being East Asia, the Caribbean, the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, the Maldives and coastal Indian Ocean. Many of these regions have a desperate need to improve transport effectiveness, which is linked to their economic growth. East Asia and China are particularly good examples.

The ekranoplan market could potentially be as big as the helicopter business, of which Taylor highlighted numerous parallels: a helicopter is far less stable than a wing-in-ground effect vehicle, it offers similar point-to-point speed, yet it has secured a niche market worth US$5 billion a year.

"If wing-in-ground effect vessels [with far greater passenger capacity than even the largest of choppers] were to cost only one-tenth the price of a helicopter then the market could still be worth US$500 million. Surely this is an incentive for potential players, investors and suppliers to take an interest in the sector."

A prototype technology demonstrator of the HoverWing concept was built and successfully trialled over 3000km in 1997, but the task is "to move from the R&D and concept prototype work that has already been conducted, and put the HoverWing into series production". This challenge has now been taken up by an Indonesian company that has acquired the rights to HoverWing.

The future of WiG still lies in the balance, acknowledged Taylor. "It is surprising how few people are interested in making billions of dollars." But Hypercraft Associates wants to redress the balance and act as the catalyst that brings together the parties and resources to make it happen. Only time will tell if WiG can rise above the apathy and conservatism with which it is currently blighted.

Nevertheless, several other active projects in the world serve as a note of encouragement: Korea has a current research programme aimed at regional transport solution. Several projects are active in Russia. In Singapore the Flightship 8 project (also designed by Fischer Flugmechanik) has been resurrected by WigtWorks Pte and in Germany, MTE began trials with its new 8-sea SeaFalcon craft earlier this year, also for Indonesia. A military WiG programme as even been disclosed by Iran. D