



IN CONVERSATION WITH
BJARKE INGELS

The prolific Danish starchitect is playing a key role in constructing the world of the future through his sustainable yet design centric building methods

TEXT BY **TASNEEM MERCHANT**
PHOTOGRAPH BY **KT AULETA** COURTESY **BIG**

“...ARCHITECTS ARE THE MIDWIVES OF THE CONTINUOUS BIRTH AND REBIRTH OF THE CITY, OF SOCIETY REGENERATING ITSELF..”

How much can you write about someone who is constantly in the industry’s limelight? How do you begin to justify in words the larger than life ideas, thoughts and inspirations of a person who lives by the motto of go “BIG” or go home?

Danish architect Bjarke Ingels is someone who doesn’t need any introduction; he doesn’t even have to make a sound when entering a room full of people. You just instinctively know he has arrived. The impact of the high octane energy he brings with him can best be described as being hit by a speeding train.

Some of his recent works have been at the centre of many heated debates, but that’s the beauty of what he does. His radical ideas and designs are not for the faint hearted. His studio, not purely coincidentally called BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group), lives up to the acronym. Take for instance Via 57 West, the newly completed building in New York. Its sloping sides and unique triangular shape bothered quite a few critics who found it a blasphemous addition to the linear, almost uniform structures dominating New York’s skyline. But Bjarke, convinced of his design, soldiered on and today, the edifice stands as one of the most recognisable landmarks in the city.

Looking at his outstanding achievements, few would guess that Bjarke was actually interested in pursuing a career as a graphic novelist. By his own admittance he “went to architecture school to get better at drawing. Apart from LEGO and cool James Bond movies, architecture was an art form I had no interest in. After two years of free-hand sketching and other technical classes, I was exposed to the field and it intrigued me. For me, the tipping point was when I discovered that it can’t be independent

of social, economic and political issues...the possibilities were exciting!” exclaims Bjarke.

And to a great extent, this thought process is also at the core of his world renowned practice, BIG. “Design decisions should not be based on stylistic obsessions or rules, but on the basis of knowledge and observation.” He elaborates on how he applies it to every project he undertakes: “The location, climate, building regulations, social environment and what you want to make out of it all, play an important part...I don’t believe in rules – a defining style is in some ways the sum of all your inhibitions.”

This is what Bjarke refers to as his “Information Driven Design” philosophy. Every little aspect ranging from culture and cost to landscape are taken into account before proceeding with a project. Perhaps the most comprehensive look into his ideals is offered by his book, Yes is More which takes away from Mies van der Rohe’s “less is more” aesthetic. “We proposed it as an optimistic motto for ‘inclusivism’ – an architecture that is driven by saying yes to all the demands and concerns of the surrounding society,” explains the Danish architect.

The suave creative strongly believes that his professional pursuit of excellence and pushing boundaries can change the world, as “architects are the midwives of the continuous birth and rebirth of the city, of society regenerating itself. A town is a collective project; the ultimate being a space of maximum innovation while using minimum means.”

Several of his projects have a futuristic bend, looking straight out of a sci-fi movie. Take for instance his plans for overhauling the Amager Resource Centre, a waste to energy plant with a ski slope. “Copenhagen

will get its first ski mountain, opening this winter. This is the essence of hedonistic sustainability – you can make the world cleaner and more fun in the same stroke,” he claims.

Just last month, BIG completed the Tirpitz Museum in Blavand, Denmark turning a German World War II era bunker into a cultural complex comprising four exhibition spaces. “This ‘almost invisible’ museum is the antithesis of a militaristic, concrete monolith. Soon, precise cuts made in the sand dunes will be able to guide visitors to the showcase, effectively combining the natural landscape and artificial construct in a striking fashion.” Bjarke explains. In addition, his studio is also working on several projects in New York, including the Big U, an ambitious resilience infrastructure in Lower Manhattan which will provide specialised social and environmental amenities tailor made to the needs of specific neighbourhoods and Eleventh, a pair of curved travertine and bronze condo hotel towers rising along New York’s High Line. We can’t wait to see what this brilliant maverick pulls out of his hat next. ♦

RIDING ON A WISH

For a man who fulfills other’s visions, his dream project just happens to be for the toy company that first got him intrigued in the field – LEGO. “BIG being invited to design the LEGO House was a dream come true for me. If the studio had been founded with the sole purpose of realising one single building, it would have to be this one. For me, these blocks are a very simple way of explaining what it means to be an architect...and now we get to see the structure come to life and open in Denmark this September!”

Bjarke Ingels, Copenhagen, New York and London. Website: www.big.dk

GROVE AT GRAND BAY

This was the first condominium project undertaken by the studio in the US. Located in Miami, the twisting towers built in 2016 seem to be caught in a spin. Interestingly, the development of this property also provided a boost to the economic situation of the community.



ELLE
DECOR
LOVES

SKY HIGH

Bjarke's creations are easily recognisable due to their asymmetry, towering height and almost LEGO-like playful quality

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY **IWAN BAAN, JINHO LEE, NIC LEHOUX and RASMUS HJORTSHOJ** COURTESY **BIG**



SERPENTINE GALLERY PAVILION

The temporary 2016 structure in London was an amalgam of opposing ideas – transparent yet opaque, blob and box-like and modular yet sculptural. This was achieved using extruding fibreglass frames. The linear form “stretches” at the end to accommodate a hall.



HUALIEN RESIDENCES The apartment for this project in Hualien Taiwan was completed in 2015. While the shape of the house mimics the surrounding hills, the green roofs enable it to blend with the environs



VIA 57 WEST

The New York skyscraper which opened in early 2017, is located on the banks of the Hudson river. The visibly dramatic sloping side serves the dual purpose of opening up the central courtyard to the sky while ensuring all apartments overlook the sweeping scenery.