

BIG Aspirations

Bjarke Ingels, founder of BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group) has revolutionised the architectural scene. Vibrant, experimental, eclectic—his firm has invented new paradigms in the design world. Through a series of award-winning design projects and buildings, Bjarke Ingels has created an international reputation as a member of a new generation of architects that combine shrewd analysis, playful experimentation, social responsibility and humour. Alongside his architectural practice, Bjarke has been a visiting professor at Rice University's School of Architecture and at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. He currently holds a guest lecturer position at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. In conversation with Sarita Vijayan, Editor & Brand Director, Indian Architect & Builder Magazine, the maverick entrepreneur reveals the secret behind his architectural genius.

Photograph: courtesy Nicklas Rudfjell



SV. You have broken traditional norms of architecture—you are young, successful and do not play by the rules. What were the difficulties you faced while starting out early in your career?

BI. Architecture is a gentleman's sport. Projects take half a decade to complete and you rarely get entrusted with significant commissions before you are middle aged. In addition, it is governed by a sort of catch 22 – you won't get the museum commission before you have already built one. So, breaking in and getting the first project is tough. Finally public projects suffer from the fact that since most architectural projects take at least five years from start to finish and public elections are every 4 years in Denmark – you often run the risk that political change will undermine your projects' public financing before you get off the ground. We had to tackle all of the above and have failed multiple times before making it through. You have to be like an 'architectural Duracell Bunny' and just keep going.

SV. You have worked with Rem Koolhaas, how was your experience and how did it shape your architectural influence and sensibility?

BI. I started studying architecture in 1993, the year *S, M, L, XL* was published. In that sense, I studied Rem Koolhaas before I studied Le Corbusier. It is hard for my generation to think of architecture without including Koolhaas. I think, his biggest influence is the notion that architecture is intricately involved in society and that each project relates to a specific context – be that physical, cultural, political, economical or technological.

SV. How does the nature of your work impact the size and make-up of your practice?

BI. The fact that we now have projects all over the world – Europe, Asia, North and South America (we just got a 80,000sqm commission on the waterfront of Manhattan!) has exploded the ethnic diversity within the office – 2/3 of BIG are internationals and more than 20 different nationalities populate our team (including 3 Indians). This cultural diversity severely enriches the office culture, the amount of references, contacts and ideas that populate the conversations. You get infinitely richer discussions when each problem is viewed from so many different perspectives. Any cultural bias is neutralised by the lack of a monocultural perspective.

SV. What part does 'networking' play today, in the field of architecture?

BI. Architecture is the art and science of continually refurbishing the surface of our planet, so it fits better to the way we want to live. If our cities and buildings restrict us or prevent us from doing what we want, we have the skills and the responsibility to change them! But where a sculptor can create a sculpture by hammering on a piece of marble until it looks like what he/she wants to express, an architect cannot achieve anything on his own. You need to get the team to work together towards a shared vision. You need the clients to agree that this is what they

want, the users that this is what they need, the engineers that it will stand up, the contractors that it can be built, the city officials that it is according to code, the financiers that they will pay for it etc.... Unless you are capable of getting this heterogeneous army of different people with different agendas to agree – nothing will happen. So, the capacity to communicate and operate within the matrix of social and professional networks is key to any architect today.

SV. What elements do you feel would add to your physiological, meteorological architectural vocabulary in the future? How do you imagine your architectural language will develop over the next 5 years?

BI. Banally, I would say that architecture and nature will fuse more and more. Cities and buildings will start to operate like ecosystems that channel the flow of resources: energy, heat, air, water etc. as well as the flow of people, bicycles and cars. Not a nostalgic idea of sustainability that sends us back to some romantic notion of the golden days in the past, but a progressive notion of sustainability that imagines new, hybrid, manmade ecologies that are both urban and natural at the same time. Our Mountain House and the up coming Battery projects are small steps in that direction.

SV. Your 'yes is more' philosophy is now also a comic strip. Kindly elaborate on the philosophy. Also, how did the idea of a comic strip come about?

BI. Architecture is the art and science of continually refurbishing our planet to fit to the way we want to live. Recently we asked ourselves if we could invent a format that would combine drawings, images and words to tell the stories behind the projects. We discovered that it already existed – in the form of the comic book. So we simply copied the format of the comic book to take you behind the scenes of the design process and reveal some of all the unseen incidents, accidents and influences of society that shape our buildings and cities in to what they are. We called this archicomic 'Yes is More' as a sort of evolution of the ideas of some of our heroes. Obviously, Mies van der Rohe triggered the modernist revolution with 'Less is More'. Then Philip Johnson introduced promiscuity or at least openness to changing styles, saying "I'm a whore". In fact, we think Darwin is the one who best explained our design process. At each design meeting there are way too many ideas than can possibly survive. Through a process of architectural selection we select which ones may live and which ones must die. One example is our design for a new city library and hotel in downtown Copenhagen. It was a really hard job.

SV. Your works have been recognised worldwide, when can we see BIG in India?

BI. Soon I hope! I have great interest in India and my CEO Sheela Maini Søgaard is half Indian. So when the opportunity arises—we will be ready for it! ■