



Bjarke Ingels with BIG's Serpentine Pavilion (2016)

## BJARKE INGELS ON HIS REVOLUTIONARY ARCHITECTURE: WE'RE HERE TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES

Bjarke Ingels has designed buildings from New York to Norway. Are they great or gimmicky? Chris Harvey finds out

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As befits an architect whose reputation has long sat somewhere between wunderkind and enfant terrible, Bjarke Ingels seems ever so slightly the worse for wear when we meet: the collar of his black shirt sits at a determinedly rogue angle; his hair looks slept in. But there's also a fervency to him, an evident absence of self-doubt.

The 44-year-old Dane has been described by the Dutch master Rem Koolhaas, for whom he worked briefly, as 'the first major architect who has disconnected the profession completely from angst'. Yet it soon becomes clear he is more philosopher than punk. He quotes Kierkegaard – 'Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards' – and William Gibson: 'The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed'. His most singular quality, though, may be that he turns his thoughts into reality.

Ingels has been designing and realising large building projects since his mid-twenties, at the rate of about two per year. This

year, he tells me, there will be 12, from the dramatic waste energy power station outside Copenhagen that doubles as an artificial ski slope, to the striking Twist gallery that opens this month in the Kistefos sculpture park north of Oslo. BIG – Bjarke Ingels Group, the architecture firm he founded in 2005 – is getting bigger.

He now employs 500 people, in New York, Copenhagen and London, and has certainly disconnected himself from any anxiety about auteurism. 'I love it when I come up with the best idea and I swear that it does happen but it's not my job,' he says. 'My job is to make sure that the best idea is the one we pursue collectively, regardless of who came up with it.'

"That's why we don't really talk a lot about 'that was my idea, that was your idea' because in the end there'll be a team of 15 to 20 people working on this for, like, six years, so if some idiot walks around saying, 'that was my idea', then you say 'what the f--- are you talking about?' It's an evolutionary process."



The Twist gallery, designed by BIG for Kistefos Museum

The results can be bold and eye-catching, whether large-scale, such as the waterfront apartment complex Via 57 West in New York, or smaller, such as the spiral museum for Swiss watchmakers Audemars Piguet now under construction in Le Brassus, near Geneva. They're often playful, too: BIG's Lego experience centre in the Danish town of Billund looks like a giant Lego brick model. As a boy, Ingels says, there was always an ongoing Lego city taking shape in his room in Vedbaek on the north-east coast of Denmark. He recalls, at five or six, driving across Europe in the back of a Morris Minor Traveller estate ('you know the one, like a traditional farmhouse on wheels, baby blue, warm wood') on family holidays to Yugoslavia. 'It would take three days both ways, I was drawing in the back of the car, seeing a lot of mountains and castles, and itching to get back and build them in Lego. I remember this almost physical drive for creativity.'

In grown-up architecture that drive can be frustrated by the long-established commissioning structure by which practices must bid for work via design competitions. It is, says Ingels, 'heartbreaking, because, oh my God, do you lose a lot of competitions. Sometimes you are genuinely beaten by someone who just nailed it or maybe bent the one rule that you didn't bend, and then you're sort of, 'ah f---, why didn't we?' But most of the time, to be honest, I think you end up being beaten by a project that is less. It's very often when I feel that we have done our best work that we don't win, and that we lose to a project that is simply less ambitious, less daring, more conventional.'

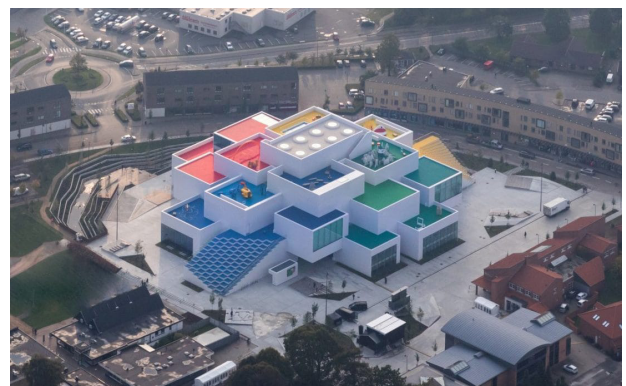
When that happens, he says, 'you somehow have to double down, and say, 'we're not here to try to second-guess this kind of self-censorship, we're here to try to push the boundaries.' Because if you win you're going to spend your next five to 10 years realising this, so if it isn't a dream you're realising, then what are you spending your life on?

'We just lost a project in Paris that was a f---ing masterpiece, if you ask me... We turned the building inside out – the only way to describe it is somewhere between an Escher drawing and a kind of Salvador Dali melted clock kind of thing. I really couldn't imagine it could be done any better, but it was maybe just one bridge too far, you know.'

There is no overarching style to BIG's oeuvre, although mountain forms, geometric shapes and hybrid uses all figure; there's also a problem-solving quality, such as in the 'tactical interventions' that Ingels describes making in BIG's the Dry Line, New York's flood defences, that are fashioned into an urban park that shifts personality between neighbourhoods.

If the projects have a unifying concern, it's sustainability, which Ingels sees as a 'common challenge that I think is going to drive many sectors, including architecture and urbanism'. He's been developing a 'floating cities' project with a company called Oceanix, that he says offers the opportunity to create a human-made ecosystem from scratch 'because there are no existing inferior technologies already in place – you need to be able to power it locally with renewable energy, capture water and clean it, deal with waste either through composting or recycling or using it to create energy, and you need to be able to produce all your food locally.'

It's a for-profit project, he explains. 'Essentially it's about printing real estate, if you like, in dense urban regions where a kind of floating neighbourhood would make economic sense, but it could be a way to develop the necessary technologies at scale so that when it becomes urgent in French Polynesia or the Maldives, it has already been developed.'



Lego House in Billund, Denmark, another Ingels work

He has a vision of the populations of coral islands slowly migrating to a floating city as water levels rise, leaving the coral to grow, perhaps becoming the city's park instead of its building plot.

His imagination was nurtured in the forest around the tiny house where he grew up, he says. 'You could walk out the door, down the lawn and enter it. For a kid, a forest is a place where you can create a lot of parallel worlds, create some pretty significant structures over time, and there were a lot of other kids so there was a not insignificant amount of construction going on.'

His elder sister was musically talented, his much younger brother a competitive sportsman who became a successful poker player. Bjarke was secure in his own talent, though, he says – he could draw better than anyone he knew, and he planned originally to be a comic-book artist. Sibling order explains much about his personality, he adds: 'I'm a little brother who became a big brother.' He explains that his irresponsible, rule-breaking role shifted when his sister went away to America for a year and he had to live up to the part of admired older brother. 'It fits quite well as training for becoming the head of an architecture office,' he says, intending it very seriously.

Inevitably, BIG's success has made Ingels wealthy. I wonder if it has changed him or his work. 'Of course, I can afford a more grown-up lifestyle than in my earlier years,' he says. His penthouse apartment overlooking the East River in the Dumbo area of Brooklyn is evidence of that, although he notes that in Copenhagen he and his partner, the Spanish architect Ruth Otero, live on a houseboat. Constructed from a small car ferry – 'it's almost a floating loft' – it was designed according to the philosophy of his former professor, Jens Thomas Arnfred, he says with a grin – 'it doesn't matter what it costs as long as it looks cheap'. The arrival of his first child, a son, Darwin, last November, has 'triggered some massive nesting instincts,' he adds.

Like others who have risen rapidly, such as the English designer Thomas Heatherwick, Ingels has attracted criticism. Some think his work gimmicky, others wonder if his buildings have the finish that carries the design into every aspect of the form. For Ingels, function is as important as form. One of the early works that he's most proud of, the 8 House apartment complex on the outskirts of Copenhagen, was completed despite the global economic collapse of 2008. The developer nearly pulled the plug, but was already down £30 or £40 million, so cut his costs and continued. 'As a result, the finish is rather raw,' Ingels says. 'But the idea's so powerful' – a small-scale mountain village in the guise of a large urban city block – 'that it doesn't need that kind of traditional refinement in order to live.'

Does he believe that if you reach a certain level you are there to be shot at? 'Yeah, of course. I think it's probably true in all

aspects of life but it's very much true in architecture. I think informed criticism is a useful tool – it's what we do in the office every time we meet, we criticise what's on the drawing board – it's how things get refined. But I think there's not a lot of informed criticism in the public forum. A typical scenario is to highlight one or two things that are specifically nice [then say], 'but is it really how we want to live in the future, blah, blah, blah?'

It bespeaks 'vagueness and insecurity', he believes, a response to the new that can be summed up as: 'Let's at least cover our ass so we don't end up endorsing something that turns out to not be so great.'



BIG's Amager Bakke/Copenhill, a ski slope and climbing wall on a waste-to-energy plant in Copenhagen

Architecture in general is a little paralysed by this kind of insecurity, he adds. 'I think the only way to be timeless is to be of your time. The things we consider timeless exude that authenticity – it's not that they're undateable, it's actually that they're a blatant manifestation of the spirit of the time that they're from.'

That sense of the zeitgeist is visible in BIG's design for Elon Musk's Hyperloop, a futuristic transportation system intended to make Dubai to Abu Dhabi a 12-minute journey. It's there, too, in the collaboration with Heatherwick for Google's California campus HQ – currently under construction – which aims to blur the boundaries between building and natural world. And it may yet be seen in the Two World Trade Center tower that was to replace Norman Foster's original design in Manhattan. That project's on hold. Ingels isn't.

The Twist gallery at Kistefos Museum, Norway, opens on Sept 18 ([kistefosmuseum.com](http://kistefosmuseum.com)). For more information on BIG, see [big.dk](http://big.dk)