

Bjarke Ingels.
Photo [BIG](#)

Unleashing New Universes

By reading science fiction, Bjarke Ingels learned how a single triggering idea can create a whole new world.

Text [Terri Peters](#)

In 2005, Danish architect Bjarke Ingels founded BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group). The young office has several projects under construction, such as the prestigious new Danish Maritime Museum, and has completed a series of high-profile housing schemes, including the Mountain Dwellings (*Mark 15*) and 8 House (*Mark 29*). Ingels currently lives in New York City, where BIG opened an office to run the West 57th Street project, a gleaming waterfront skyscraper shaped like a distorted pyramid with a hole in the middle. Ingels calls it 'a Manhattan high-rise meets Copenhagen courtyard building'.

The office is known for its bold graphic style; colourful, large-scale physical models; and optimistic, almost utopian, ideas for living in the city. BIG has published two books about its work: *Yes Is More: An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution* (2009) and the pink monograph *BIG*

'You can be critical by being affirmative'

(2010). A convincing lecturer, the 37-year-old Ingels promotes 'hedonistic sustainability' and argues that architecture should produce mashups and hybrids of form and function to achieve better ways of living. We meet over smørrebrød in the lunchroom of his lively Copenhagen studio to talk about what's on his bookshelf.

You mentioned you got a book as a present last night. Can you tell us about it? And what's the last book you read?

Bjarke Ingels: People love to give me cookbooks. Last night I had dinner with Claus Meyer, the guy who started the Noma restaurant here in Copenhagen, and he gave me the *Almanak* [a 696-page cookbook, published in 2010, with recipes for every day of the year], because he knows I don't cook. I know quite a few of the

A selection of Bjarke Ingels' favourite books.

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (London: HarperCollins, 1992)

Matt Ridley, *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010)

good chefs in Denmark. I guess one day I'll have a hungry child, and then I'll need to learn. Right now, I'm reading too many books at the same time – some old, some new.

I am rereading an old favourite, *Red Mars* [1992] by Kim Stanley Robinson. The book is about the colonization of Mars, and it is written with technical and scientific rigour, with descriptions of psychology and sociology. I like to think about such things. About the discussions you'd have when starting a new world from scratch – do you terraform or not? Do you prioritize making a new human habitat, or do you preserve what is there? Do you 'pollute' the environment in order to make it possible for human habitation? I started reading it when I was on an expedition to Greenland. Survival is something you think about when contemplating Mars, but also when you're in Greenland. We were given special survival suits that would keep us alive for four hours if we were to fall in the water – without the suit, you've got something like four minutes. As part of a group of artists and scientists, I couldn't help thinking of climate, weather and environmental contamination.

I've also started reading *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves* [2010] by Matt Ridley. He opens by comparing a hand axe from 10,000 BC with a computer mouse. Similar shape, size, both designed for the hand, but one is designed by a single individual manipulating the material with his hands, and the other couldn't be totally designed by even 100 people working together. The mouse is a synthesis of so many specialized processes and skills that no single person could explain how it works down to the minutest detail. Architecture is like that, too, of course.

Do you find this worrying or amazing?

Amazing. If, as architects, we can navigate collaborations and achieve collective projects, there is no limit to what we can do. This makes it better for everyone. Some people say that wealth is always at the expense of poverty, but that's totally untrue. Of course, some people get rich by abusing others, but by definition wealth can create value and surplus out of nothing and can lead to more wealth for more people. The traditional idea that you have an either-or choice – like, for example, between sustainability and quality of life – is just not true. You can have both.

You've said you were influenced by a lot of science-fiction books, specifically Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* [*La possibilité d'une île*, 2005], Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* [1985] and Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* [1968]. What is it you find so inspiring in science fiction?

It started in high school when I discovered William Gibson, specifically the *Neuromancer* trilogy [*Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988)]. I had neither a cell phone nor an email address, of course, so his concepts were so out there and yet so understandable – this idea of cyberspace, the matrix – and then to think he was writing all this on his typewriter! The things Gibson introduced in book one have this sort of omnipresence in book three. He proposes that things are all electronically connected, so something that has uninhibited growth within the matrix can almost become a divine presence. And since everything

Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005) Translation of Michel Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 2005)

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (New York: Tor Books, 1985)

Philip K Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Doubleday, 1968)

else is connected to the Net, such as appliances, all things can be manipulated from this omnipresence. Suddenly you have a really practical model for a divine being. As a youngster, I was just like *ahhh* . . .

What this had done more than anything I'd read before was to monitor the impact of technological development on contemporary culture. Gibson creates plausible projections of the recognizable things around us and suggests how they can evolve in completely random ways. Before that I had never read this type of science fiction; it gave me an insight into different perspectives. I must say that some of the authors that have meant something to me are science-fiction writers.

Right now, it's the work of Philip K Dick that defines what really interests me in science fiction. Why is it relevant for me as an

William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984)

Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986)

Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997)

architect? His approach is that science fiction is not a space opera. It is not a story set in the future but a story whose plot is triggered by some kind of innovation – often a technological innovation, but it could also be political, cultural or social. The whole story is a narrative pursuit of the potential of the idea or innovation. He writes about what unfolds as a result: problems, conflicts, possibilities, freedoms. What I like is that the reader can think along with the writer during this process. It's almost like unleashing a whole new universe based on a single triggering idea.

So it's all in the idea. How do you come up with the big ideas for your projects? Where do you start?

If I'm designing a school, for example, I first find out whether there's anything new in pedagogic >

ideas or theories of intelligence. Or maybe I'll look for something new in the context of the project, in the building technology or in the media to be applied. As soon as I discover some kind of innovation that has altered the game, making the project is like pursuing the consequence of these changes. At that point, I don't have to come up with lots of new ideas; I just have to work with the consequences of a single innovation.

Another example is our New York project, where we asked ourselves: What would happen if we were to introduce a Copenhagen courtyard into an American skyscraper? Once the question is posed, the architecture unfolds, and that includes its expression and everything we have to solve, pursue and materialize. It's all the consequence of a simple triggering idea.

'It's not true that wealth is always at the expense of poverty'

Yes Is More focuses on your unconventional approach to architecture and contains no plans, sections or renderings. It is a graphic novel with a mix of media that includes film stills, photographs, drawings and Bjarke Ingels as hero. Are you a fan of comic books?

Until I entered architecture school, I was very much into comic books. I wanted to be a graphic novelist. At first, my main interest was not the storytelling but the drawings. As a kid who loved to draw, I was totally into *Spirou* comics, published in Belgium. The artist I liked best was Jean Giraud, also known as Moebius. The *John Difo* series was my favourite. The artist also did set designs for *The Fifth Element* [Luc Besson, 1997]. This is very psychedelic sci-fi stuff. I also like American comic-book artist Frank Miller. He's famous for *Sin City* [1991], of course, but

the graphic novel that caught my attention was *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* [1986]. It is inspired by *Watchmen* [1986], the work of Alan Moore, but is more dynamic and dark. Both Moebius and Moore have this amazing way of telling stories by mixing all kinds of media. Our book, *Yes Is More*, is clearly an homage to Frank Miller. Ours has the American graphic-novel format.

Aside from science fiction, graphic novels and architecture books, have you been inspired by books that might surprise me?

In my late 20s I started reading nonfiction, in particular books about new ideas in management theory. I was sharing an apartment with a business psychologist, and we constantly talked about these things. Emerging in the mid to late

'90s was a discussion on contemporary management – about not telling people what to do but rather creating an environment, developing a value base and establishing feedback loops that would allow innovation to prosper. I also read philosophy, like Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze, and I read Manuel De Landa's *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* [1997]. I was trying to get my hands on all kinds of things that would help me acquire tools for analysis and for guiding processes of collaboration and experimentation. Then I got fed up with stuffing my head with self-help . . .

What about *S,M,L,XL* and the work of OMA? You worked there for three years, as a student and also after graduating. You took part in the Seattle Public Library project. How did that come about?



Photo Jakob Glatt

While spending my fourth year as a student in Barcelona, I was digging through the library, where I found some weird little books of essays by Sanford Kwinter, who compared OMA's work to the dog-fighting skills of WWII pilot Chuck Yeager. After that I read *Delirious New York* [1978] and *S,M,L,XL* [1995]. Graphically, *S,M,L,XL* has been massively influential. But the lesson, I think, is that there's a best way to tell every story. For instance, in *Yes Is More* we deliberately omitted plans, sections and the relentless publication of facts and figures. Our focus was on where the ideas come from and how they plug into society.

Your work is consistently called avant-garde, a term that makes me think of architecture moving against the mainstream, away from the norm. I'd like to think that your architecture is 'for' and not 'against' something. What do you think?

Yes, you can be critical by being affirmative. I believe that great art – literature, film, architecture, painting, whatever – expands our perception of the world and of life. It might be the work of an impressionist painter who shows you an explosion of colour in a pond, or a Damien Hirst installation that reveals the presence of death in the beautiful colours of pharmaceuticals. Both make you aware of things you weren't aware of before.

You've done two books in the past three years. Is a third in the pipeline?

We're planning it now. We have some funding from the Graham Foundation, and the title will be *Bigamy*, with 'You Can Have Both' as a tag line. This won't be a graphic novel. It's going to be organized like the human brain. [Pauses for emphasis.]

In two parts, like right brain and left brain?

Exactly. We have a deal with both Birkhäuser and Actar, and it's going to be two halves. One is rational, analytic, measurable and exact; the other is intuitive, visual and poetic. One is a Swiss publisher and the other Spanish, so it's easy to see which is which. The notion of bigamy also influences its structure. The book will focus on the aspects of our work in which the creative spark is a combination of things that are traditionally kept apart. Fusing apparently mutually exclusive components to produce a new integrated whole is at the heart of a single secret recipe for both divine creation and Darwinian evolution: You merge two distinct individuals, a mom and a dad, and get a third: the hybrid. <