

YES MAN

BJARKE INGELS

interviewed by **JEFFREY INABA**
for **VOLUME MAGAZINE**

The term Yes Man once referred to the spineless corporate crony, but today it means something else. Bjarke Ingels is a Yes Man. He says 'yes' to just about any demand, reasonable or otherwise. It fuels his ambition to accept all the political interests surrounding a project and absorb them into back-bending forms that disarm the opposition and that eventually populate large areas of Scandinavia (and beyond).

JEFFREY INABA Let's discuss your idea of evolution.

For you, revolution assumes being against something. It means being the contrarian. The first act of revolution is to say 'no', whereas the first move of evolution is to say 'yes' - 'yes' to all the requirements and demands of a project. Saying 'yes' to the client, politicians, the public requires you to process a project's often conflicting interests and to respond in an acrobatic way to find a solution suitable for all.

BJARKE INGELS I think that there is something contradictory in the fact that radicality is normally associated with reacting in opposition to somebody else's agenda. Your entire agenda is defined as being against something, rather than finding your own thing and pushing it. Secondly, it is interesting that the bad-boy is the icon of the radical. Instead, the 'good guy' could be a recipe.

If you're informed, if you're obliged to incorporate a lot of different intentions besides your own into a project, then you have a much more complex range of material to operate with and to manipulate. What we're basically trying is to say that by in-

corporating many good concerns instead of reducing them all to the lowest common denominator, you avoid compromise. Instead of meeting halfway, you oblige yourself to solve everything - to keep looking until you find that impossible move that takes into account all of the concerns of a project's constituents. Then suddenly the functional

and the fantastic become collaborators, and you as an architect don't have to refer to French philosophy, the Kaballah, or whatever source of energy an architect may use. You can just refer to the really pragmatic concerns that all the decision makers and public opinion makers are already dealing with. So architecture becomes a consequence of and the answer to a lot of problems in society. In that sense, we are much more interested in this Gesamtkunstwerk, that things are changing. And as they change, we try to observe those changes and incorporate them into the work, and to constantly gain new territory.

JI You talk about architects accepting the circumstances that they find themselves in, and responding to them by shaping the world. Can you talk more about that?

BI I think it's funny, because it relates a lot to the debate in the U.S. about 'intelligent design' - the Creationists versus the Darwinists. For Creationists, the human eye is so brilliantly engineered that it is evident some intelligent designer was behind it. They can't imagine that it evolved through this extensive process of perpetual refinement, excess, and selection. The city, just like the human species, is the way it is now because it evolved to its current state, and because we created it. And if we don't like it, we can't blame God, we can only blame ourselves. Therefore we should constantly be aware of that power and that responsibility. If it doesn't fit the way that we want to live, if the city doesn't fit the way that we want it to be, then we have to change it. I think you should always remember that we created the city, we created architecture, so therefore we can re-create it, change it, evolve it.

POLITICIAN AND THE GREAT WALL

JI You're not only an architect, you're a politician. You get involved in the political process and as a result, you are able to make your projects viable within the dynamics of political give and take. Can you talk about your experiences with the Great Wall of Housing project in Copenhagen?

BI What we are realizing is that increasingly the people we communicate with when we do projects are not our architecture colleagues. Our projects increasingly address issues that pertain to others. For instance, we did a project on our own initiative around a football field in Copenhagen. We responded to the fact that politicians wanted affordable housing because the city is fully built and people are being forced out. We wanted to create housing without cannibalizing the limited amount of the city's free space. The Great Wall

of Housing is an architectural idea to circumvent a political conflict. By doing an impossible political tightrope walk, we actually made it possible to keep the football fields and have new housing.

Architecture was a means to short-circuit an irresolvable political debate. This is where architecture can operate very differently from politics. Politics is based on conflict. If you want to get press coverage you create conflict. If you want to brand yourself as a politician you have to seek opposition, whereas in our understanding of design, you incorporate conflicts and resolve them. Your project is only going to survive if it tries to either navigate around the conflict or incorporate a lot of the concerns.

JI You have the skill to define the key problem of a conflict. You define what the conflict is, in this case between football fields and housing, and you use that as a starting point to generate a solution. You are able to articulate the political problem and use that as the basis to give value to the architectural proposal.

BI What you're saying is true, in that often you hear a politician being asked a question, and then he or she will respond by saying, 'I don't think that's the question. I think the question is...' And then they answer the question they want to answer. Of course, the entire idea of reframing the angle of the project is that you set the terms of the debate by defining what will be the key issues. Our statement was: who said that we had to choose between football fields and affordable homes?

The notion of proactive architecture has become a great field of interest, because we can just see the time we've invested in doing competitions where 400 people submit proposals and then it turns out that all that is wanted in the end is, like, a really sad scheme. You realize that you've

spent so much of your resources on something that could never have made it, regardless of how good it was. We realized that the few times we did a project that nobody asked us to do, we had a much better chance of success because we formulated the problem and its solution before anyone else. They say there's no good architecture without a good client - well then you should at least become the guys who formulate the commission, and get somebody else to want it.

JJ Can you talk a little bit about the political give-and-take process between the different parties, and how the Great Wall project functioned as a political football in a set of larger power negotiations between parties?

BI The kind of politics that can actually inform a project is the acrobatic quest that incorporates everybody's concerns, where each parameter becomes something that gives shape to the project. In the Great Wall of China, normally you would just make as simple a perimeter block as possible, but it needed to walk this tightrope between the neighbors on one side and football fields on the other side. But then, the people living in the allotment gardens nearby were afraid that others would be able to look into their gardens. So we pushed down the buildings to stop people looking in. Then, people were complaining that we were occupying too much space. But then we made the roof into a public promenade to create more public space, and so forth. You can say it became this aikido response where you constantly take criticism, incorporate it, and turn it into an architectural asset. In the end, without having designed anything, the building looked kind of cool.

We sent the proposal to all the newspapers, then we sent it to all the mayoral candidates, and it got quite

positive responses. Then when the Social Democratic candidate for mayor got elected, we met with her and she endorsed it in the press. We discovered that suddenly our project had become a component of an overall political negotiation. Normally architecture is handled in the cultural section of the paper, along with cinema, music, and other forms of entertainment, but all the articles about the project were in the first section: what I normally refer to as the 'adult section', which is about the economy and politics.

We were the initiators, but it was now the mayor's project. Suddenly, we had a really powerful alliance in which a possible downfall wouldn't be ours alone. And she really has balls. I mean, I've never met a politician who was so concerned about ideas. So often you can lose yourself in the tactics, whereas she's really a great strategic mind.

So we were called to try to explain the project to her political party. It is a little like alchemy, in that you take a field with 40 football fields, you create 2,000 homes on the field and there's still 40 football fields! So we needed to explain that in detail. Once her political party was convinced, we were invited to talk to one of the support parties, the Socialist People's Party. They raved about it, but the party leader also knew that this would be the mayor's first major political battle and that she couldn't afford to lose. So he wanted to sell his vote as expensively as possible. Then we got invited to another secret meeting with the Liberals to convince them to support it. In the end, we realized that there was this cabala that needed to be settled that had to do with negotiating the city's overall budget. Finally, both the Socialist People's Party and the Liberals supported the project, but leveraged their support in exchange for negotiating their particular interests with

the city's budget. The sub-headline of the articles that came out said that the three parties had approved the mayor's budget - and this meant that there would be affordable homes around the Klovermarken football fields. Even though the Socialist People's Party, and the Liberals were basically for it from the start, because it was the Mayor's project they didn't want to give her an easy victory. I was convinced it was just a question of getting access to these guys, showing the project, taking all the potential critique, and incorporating it. But I realized later it was all part of a much bigger bargain.

MASTER PLAN AND MASTERPIECE

JI Has your design process changed as your projects have become more entangled in politics?

Your projects have been super-compelling up until now for their fiscal or structural rationale, but now that projects are entering the public realm as part of a political debate, does that impact the way that you design?

BI I think two things have changed. As we went from being PLOT into being BIG, the office has grown bigger and our projects have grown bigger, meaning that in terms of the design process it is no longer this small group of people who practically do it themselves. It's more like this big collective of a lot of different people with a lot of different motivations doing a lot of different things. And there the design evolution has become a lot more evident. There's an incredible production, really an excess of ideas and models and materials and the sort of natural selection that you see in nature has turned into architectural selection.

And now a lot of our projects operate on a scale between urbanism and architecture. What ten years ago would have been considered a master plan, having different lots

that would grow over ten or twenty years, is now the basis for a masterpiece that you have to make into a single project. On one hand it needs to have the integrity of a single architectural project and at the same time, it needs to contain the complexity and variety of an urban neighborhood. It means that with many of our architectural projects the key issues are urban concerns, or speculations about what the city should be, what we want from our neighborhoods, and so on. All of these concerns that are actually about urbanism, now result directly in architecture.

JI A lot of architects accept the idea that the city is so complex now that it's beyond the ability of the architect to define the city to any significant degree. And as a result, they're resigned to focusing on projects of a limited scale to explore the complexity of form itself, whereas you embrace the urban complexities that exist on political, fiscal, and public levels, and synthesize those imperatives into large-scale but deceptively simple forms.

BI We've been working with this idea of pragmatic utopia. We have tried to reinstate the modernist ambition to have big ideas. It's not just a question of personal fulfillment. It's actually a tool that the world can use to constantly refurbish itself. And as an architect you're the midwife of this continual rebirth of the world as you want to live in it. But in order to not become dreamers who always collide with all the limitations of real life, we try to realize this utopian ambition within the confines of an operational unit: to think big, and to think in terms of urbanism, but to do it within a unit over which you actually have power. Once a project in that unit is materialized it will bleed out and influence its surroundings.

