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The Weight of Art

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Change of Plot

JULIEN DE SMEDT & JDS

In certain professions relatively youthful success can be a mixed blessing. After all, who wants to be the oldest enfant terrible in town? Architect Julien De Smedt is hyper aware that shooting stars can be shot down in flames, yet with his new firm JDS picking up tasty commissions from China to Copenhagen, it's not birthdays that he is counting. De Smedt is not interested in rewards for years of good service but getting his hands on something that will actually be built.

Text by Anneke Bakern, Images by Allard van der Hoek



Previous spread:
To the power of three: triangular balconies adorn the façade of the V-house in Copenhagen

From left to right:
Urban splash: harbour bath in downtown Copenhagen

The space under the chill-out deck of the Maritime youth club doubles as boat storage area for a sailing club



If you don't know what Julien De Smedt looks like, it's very difficult to spot him in his studio. Most male architects can be distinguished from their infantry because they're the only one in the office who matches their trainers with a smart suit, hides behind a secretary's antechamber or simply exudes a certain importance. De Smedt, however, for all I can tell, might as well be one of his own interns. Wearing black jeans and a trendy military cap, he blends in perfectly. Until he starts to talk, that is. We're in his studio in an old rear building in a worker's district of Copenhagen. Run-down houses and Turkish shops are interspersed with the odd hip bar: it's one of those areas that teeter fashionably on the brink of gentrification. De Smedt beckons me into his office on the first floor, a space divided off from the open-plan studio where his staff of 35 work, by a screen of yellow plastic flaps. He's jet-lagged in a hyperactive way. 'I've just returned from Brazil,' he explains. 'I was there for a B2B-forum, organised by some companies who had invited a hand-picked bunch of international architects... I'll turn this computer around to you, so I can show you some of our new work. We're just updating the website with 15 new projects.' He's an efficient chap. Within the first two minutes of our interview, he has already established that he belongs to architecture's jet set, knows business-speak and has lots of commissions.

ARCHITECTURAL COCKTAIL

So much, so young. Born in Brussels in 1975, De Smedt studied architecture at six different European universities and contends that 'as an architect, you should study cities rather than schools'. Among his teachers was Elia Zenghelis, co-founder and ex-partner of OMA, who got him his first job at OMA while he was still a student. After a year he continued his studies, but returned to Rotterdam as soon as he had finished them, allegedly summoned by His Remness in person. That's when he met Bjarke Ingels, who also worked for Koolhaas. In 2000, the pair decided to leave OMA and open their own office in Brussels, although they didn't have a single commission on the books. Shortly afterwards, they moved to Bjarke's home town of Copenhagen. Legend has it that they wanted to take a break from architecture and make a movie in the city of Dogma, hence the choice of office name, Plot. With De Smedt and Ingels hanging around waiting for funding, they casually entered a few architectural competitions and won them all. And suddenly the company name took on another twist. Within no time, Plot became the new shooting star on what was then the rather dull firmament of contemporary Danish architecture. In a country where the mediocrity of most current building projects was boring even their architects to tears, Plot made an immediate impact. De Smedt and Ingels served up a tangy architectural cocktail, consisting of two parts playfulness, one part naivety, one part pragmatics and more than a good pinch of OMA-approach. As soon as its first buildings were finished international magazines jumped on them. 'Every time Plot opens its front door, a dozen Japanese architecture students fall inside, wanting to do an internship,' a Danish friend once told me. In architecture land, that's when you know that you're the dernier cri.

HOT POTATOES

Five years later though the plot unravelled and came to an abrupt end. In early 2006, Bjarke and Julien split up. 'You can see it as a 5-year project,' De Smedt tries to explain diplomatically. 'There was nothing dramatic about it. It was just necessary for both of us. Of course we're still on speaking terms.' When pushed a bit he does admit: 'Bjarke is now finishing a lot of designs which I started. I didn't get



the really hot potatoes, because I'm not Danish. Most of them were given to Bjarke's new office BIG. I don't want to waste my energy on thinking about that, though.' Fair enough, so let's think about the obvious influence of OMA on JDS, as De Smedt's new firm is called. Luckily, he's not insulted by this observation. 'But I hope that there's more old than new OMA in my work. Its new projects lack some qualities which the old ones had. You see, a project is like a computer game: there's the level of rendering and there's the fluidity. The balance between the two has to be right.' Computer game-analogies aside, De Smedt doesn't appear half as playful as his architecture. It could be the jet lag, but during our conversation he gives the impression of someone who takes himself and his work rather seriously. But maybe that's what it takes if you want to transcend flavour of the month status. And no

Sunset beauty: the V-house in Ørestad gives its ugly neighbours the spiky shoulder



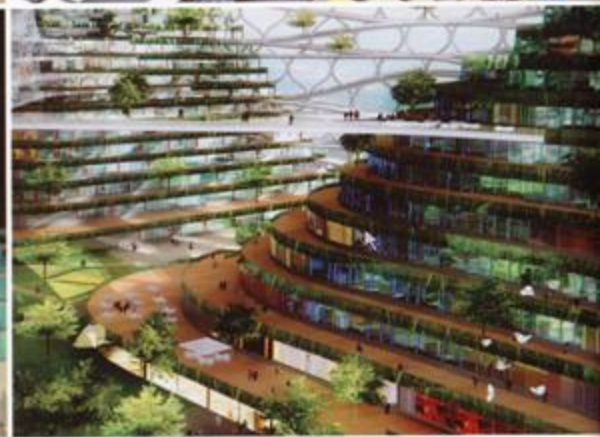
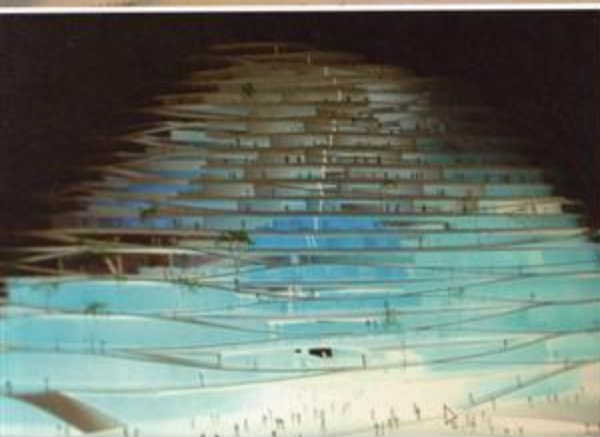
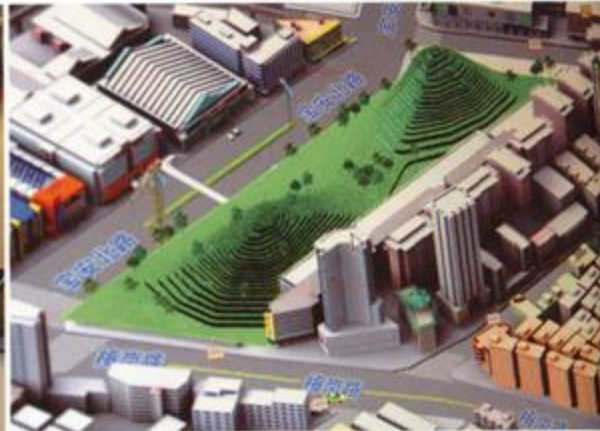
Instead of cleaning the courtyard wall of Sjakket of its graffiti, the architects integrated it into their rough-and-ready design

matter what one might think about premature architectural stardom, as Plot, the pair realised some very convincing buildings with a huge fun factor. One of the first commissions was a harbour bath in Copenhagen, finished in 2003 and consisting of nothing but a floating styrofoam platform covered in timber planks, with a protruding grandstand-cum-diving tower. Next was a youth house on a polluted beach in the east of Copenhagen, which they cleverly shoved under a blanket-like wooden deck, thus creating additional boat storage space for an adjoining sailing club and a play area for the kids. And then there's Sjakket, a recently finished youth club in a tough area of the Danish capital, housed in a former factory. The architects not only re-designed the factory interior in urban bling-bling-style, but also placed a bright red container crossbar on its roof, serving as sound studio and emblem.



Given these projects, one might suspect that Plot only received commissions in which its youth and corresponding street cred came in handy. However its pièce de résistance plays in a different league: the VM-housing complex with 221 apartments and a total area of 25,000 sq m, located in the brand new city extension of Ørestad. Instead of designing a standard block, as the urban plan envisaged, Plot split the project into two buildings with footprints in the shape of a V and an M. The reason for this was very pragmatic: 'It's a terrible location,' De Smedt explains. 'There's an elevated train track running next to it, and the neighbouring buildings are completely faceless. By re-shaping the block, we tried to blind out the ugly surroundings.' Combine that with extravagant triangular balconies, a subtle colour concept and a huge variety of floor-plans, and what you get is one of the best new hous-

Clockwise:
Colourful windows betray the re-vamped Sjakket youth centre
Inside, the two vaults clad with corrugated steel and pierced with bubbly round skylights
A steel staircase leads to the roof top sound studio
Unfinished sympathy: wooden cubicles with garage doors



This page, clockwise:
Julien De Smedt with his next building plot

Move any mountain: JDS wants to re-introduce nature into a Chinese metropolis

According to JDS, you can never go wrong with a terraced structure, be it inside or outside

Shap til you drop – from vertigo. Shopping centre design for Shenzhen

ing projects around. According to De Smedt, the recipe for success is shaping instead of styling. 'A lot of Danish architecture is styled. Instead of thinking about shapes, they clad the walls with marble. I really wouldn't want a project to become boring just because there has to be marble in it.'

GUGGENHEIM ON LSD

VM was Plot's first commission, but it's also among Bjarke's and Julien's last joint projects to be finished. And like in any decent divorce case, there are bones of contention. Next to VM, its Mountain Dwellings are currently under construction, a hill-shaped stack of housing cubes, the roofs of which form a terrace landscape. 'The project credits are a case for the lawyers,' De Smedt says, but refuses to comment further. He also doesn't really feel like explaining why terrace landscapes keep re-appearing in his architecture. 'I like simple things. And a roof terrace is nice, there's no discussion about that.' What he does feel happy talking about is the impression that his recent trip to Brazil made on him. 'A lot of modernity happened there. You know, European modernism is a sad story because it was all about re-building countries destroyed by war. Brazil was about building something new, creating utopia.' He's undeniably got a point there, although it might be a bit over-simplified.

This mix of wit and precociousness seems to be characteristic of De Smedt, and it can also be felt in the projects JDS is currently working on, of which 80 per cent are outside Denmark. 'We have several projects in the Chinese city of Shenzhen in the pipeline,' he says. 'We're designing a 220-storey mix-use tower (housing/commercial/public/offices) with a park on top and elevators circling around it. It's actually not a building, but a vertical urban plan – an architect's wet dream. This is my idea of what things should be like when they get this insane.' In addition, there are plans to introduce some moun-

tain-shaped dwellings into the rapidly growing city, which lies on originally hilly, artificially flattened terrain. 'We want to bring back nature in the form of buildings,' De Smedt explains. 'Who says that buildings have to be boxes?' And as if that wasn't enough, there are also plans for a shopping mall in the shape of a terraced hill. 'It's Guggenheim on LSD. One access route leads via the terraces on the outside, an alternative route is inside.' Open-air luxury shopping in a subtropical climate? Doesn't that sound a bit implausible? De Smedt simply dismisses my objection with a shrug, and suddenly I feel like an utter killjoy. Okay, let's approach this differently: does he seriously believe that all this will be built? 'Oh, of course it's China, so you never know. But to be honest, I don't care so much. I got paid up-front.'

STARARCHITECT

At the end of our conversation, De Smedt takes a little sketch of the VM-houses which he scribbled onto a notepad with a ballpoint pen while talking, provides it with a JDS office stamp and hands it to me. I'm slightly bewildered. Is he more aware of the ironic side of his emerging stararchitect status than I thought? Maybe. But the simple answer is that the DIY souvenir is a business card, and even this networking tool is serious in its playfulness. #

www.jdsarchitects.com

This page, clockwise:
In Shenzhen, JDS is planning to build a 220-storey, three-dimensional Curly Wurl

A close-up makes clear just how big the housing tower in Shenzhen will be

In a flap: a yellow plastic curtain divides Julien's realm from that of his employees

Model of a competition entry for the Crown Hotel in Trondheim, Norway

