

WVS



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BABEL, METROPOLIS, BLADE RUNNER, THE 5TH ELEMENT... THE FUTURE SHOULD BE VERTICAL... BIGGER... SIZE DOES MATTER!

'THE BIG STRUGGLE' IN ARCHITECTURE

Size is an architect's ongoing wet dream. In an architect's world the term 'vertical city' is a cliché. We (architects, film makers, cartoonists, writers...) all once had that phantasm of creating vertical urbanism. Rare are the great architects who haven't contributed to this obsession.

Not so long ago we, at JDS Architects, were asked to do a piece in the city in Shenzhen, China. Shenzhen is the factory equivalent to Hong Kong. Shenzhen is mainland, historically Chinese, and an urban center with an impressive quantity of production facilities; like in many parts of China: the so-called 'factory of the world'. But for Shenzhen it's about to change. This year the city opens a bridge to Hong Kong. This new link will transform the business and therefore living conditions of the region. Companies will relocate to the mainland, which is now so easily accessible, and erect headquarters on more affordable grounds (current real estate in Hong Kong goes up to 20 times the cost of mainland values). Following these speculations we were asked to design a new urban quarter in Shenzhen.

It had to be 2.5 million square meters.

It had to be 666 meter tall.

And/or 888 meter tall.

Actually, it should really be 1111 meter tall.

And twisted.

Feng Shui, that is.

Those terms and conditions are rather abstract, in fact absurd, for western, science infused architects like our selves. The specificity of those requirements didn't really matter. All they revealed was that it had to be big!

There's a strange way about working on big things for the sake of them being big. It's not the scale in itself that's interesting, rather the possibilities it unleashes. But the scale confuses the stake: Is it about making the biggest building ever or understanding that at such a scale it is no longer about designing a building but really an entire city?

We did quite a few wasted attempts until we realized that the task wasn't about fitting the surfaces on the site but rather to achieve a socially and logistically functioning vertical city. From that point on everything became more obvious. At least our mistakes were striking. We had to realize that to make a vertical city is not to make a tower! A city offers a complex set of social and spatial interactions while a tower offers one condition: an elevator to connect a series of repetitive floors. The elevator is the link to everything and therefore your only chance to meet anyone. For that reason we don't live in towers. We occupy them as little as we can... and then rush out to wider horizons.

There is a saying that it's not so much the length that matters, rather the width... that works in architecture too: the moment we covered the entire site with our building/city we reached those new horizons. The impossibility of making a 350 m deep building made us work on excavations that quickly allowed us to realize neighborhoods with all the urban components that a city contains. We suddenly felt the glimpse of achieving that architect's dream of a three-dimensional city. We came to think that to realize it was the only requirement the project demanded.

From 1986 to 1996 Shenzhen's region mutated from a landscape of mountains and forests into a continuous dense city! Urbanity took over everything. No nature subsisted. It seemed therefore obvious that this vertical adventure will be about re-introducing the most iconic Chinese natural element: the mountain. The authentic Chinese landscape is one of soft green mountains undulating to the horizon. In Chinese modern times of growth there's neither time nor space to preserve those experiences. But why is it so? Why does urbanity require the erasure of public space and nature? This project is an attempt at reconciling these oppositions... And at embracing diversities and experiences. What made Babel crumble should make this project rise...

Words by Julien De Smedt / www.jdsarchitects.com

