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003

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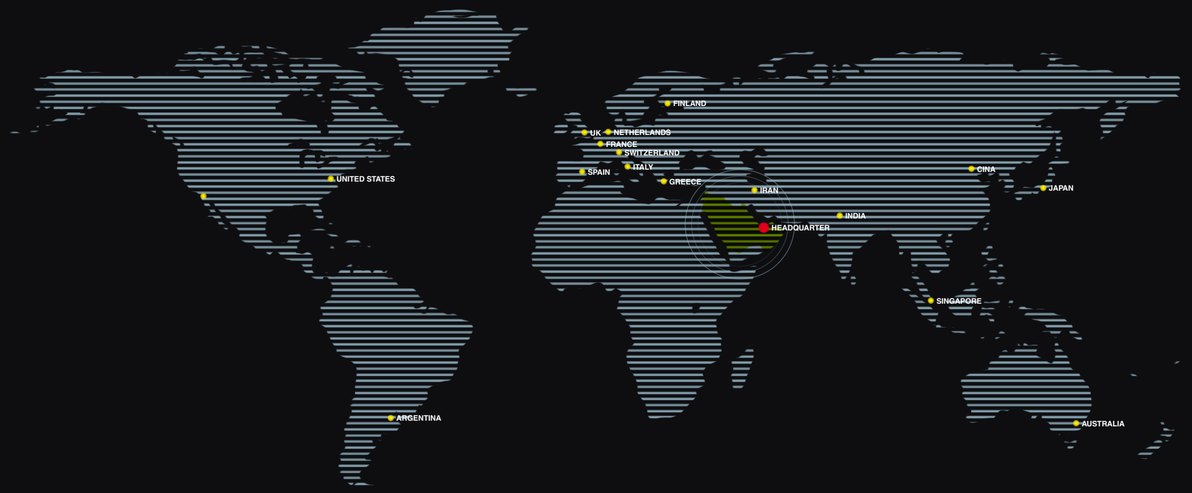

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"Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan Mosque"
Abu Dhabi
Marbles and Mosaics by Fantini Mosaici
Picture by Fantini Mosaici

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garden homes

BIG Bjarke Ingels Group

Author
BIG Bjarke Ingels Group

Work
Mountain Dwellings

Location
Copenhagen, Denmark

Year
2008

Client
Høpfner A/S, Danish Oil Company A/S

Partner-in-Charge
Bjarke Ingels

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Size
33,000 m²

Image credits
Courtesy of BIG Bjarke Ingels Group
Matteo Belfiore

It was the end of the 1950's when a young Jørn Utzon finished the construction of the Court of Kingohusene, near Copenhagen. In this interesting but not especially noted project, particularly when compared to the more famous Sydney Opera House, one notes a perfect converging synthesis of Chinese, Gothic and Islamic influences. What was, in the beginning, a single dwelling, fruit of a self-financed project, became a large scale, highly successful settlement. Bjarke Ingels is 33 and has an architecture practice in Copenhagen with 85 collaborators. He reads Nietzsche and Darwin and loves listening to Kraftwerk. He has just finished a large, 33,000 m² building capable of "combining the splendours of the suburban backyard with the social intensity of urban density". The historic context is different, but the similarities are great between this work and Utzon's, beginning with their experimental character. Bjarke worked for four years at Rem Koolhaas, from which he inherited the ability to blend experimentation with an efficient execution. During this experience he met Julien de Smedt with whom he founded the office Plot. In no time at all, it became a reference point for young European architects and obtained much international acclaim. Their slogan was an old Monty Python quote - "we are serious about being funny". After five years of fruitful collaboration, the partners decided to go their separate ways. BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group) was born, with a solid theoretic background to support it. The office's mission is the creation of "a pragmatic utopian architecture that takes on the creation of sociality, economically and environmentally perfect places as a practical objective". It is in the floor plan that Mountain Dwellings uncovers just how similar it is to its predecessor from 50 years earlier. The perfect 15 m x 15 m floor plan in Utzon's buildings becomes a perfect rectangle with sides exceeding 15m inlength. The external courtyard is, in both cases, a proportionate reduction of the geometry of that floor plan. The living room and the court are unified directly after the entrance, a further detail indicating BIG's ability to use the salient characteristics of a great master's work in a contemporary setting. Thus far, BIG's inspiration for this project is clear. But what exactly is the innovative quality of this project? It has already been referred to as part of the experimentation phase, one of BIG's constants, which is also the constant link connecting the solutions adopted during the project. Programmatic Alchemy, for example, which is a mix between the different required functions (in this case 2/3 car park and 1/3 residence), renounces all standard zoning norms and generates added value. Also, the façade creates a sort of morphing between architecture and photography. The image of Mount Everest, visible only from a distance, is obtained using perforated aluminum panels. This is both decorative and functional, as the perforations allow air and light to pass through, thereby aerating and illuminating the car park. There is one term which probably best describes BIG's work theory: Heteronomy. This relates to a thought which continually permeates all contemporary work. Since most internal stimuli have been exhausted, at least in part, architecture looks for creative thrusts from other walks of life. In an efficient definition of this, Bjarke Ingels states "architecture is society acquiring physical form". Another famous work, Lego Towers, is the perfect incarnation of a heteronomous project. Lego bricks are the construction materials, the accompanying music is the rhythm and harmony of the composition, the video is the presentation technique and the internet is the instrument for its diffusion. There is an inclined lift in Mountain Dwellings, like those used to climb hillsides. This, too, is an example of Heteronomy. It reminds us of cities in futuristic films and speaks to us of bigness which continues to transform our buildings into cities within cities. Empathy is another key word used to decipher this work. BIG is used to identifying itself with its clients and their requirements. All needs are fulfilled, and architecture is an art which can transform limits into opportunities. The long service corridors, for example, generate hints of reflection, prospective acceleration, new optical milestones and stimulating promenade architectural. There is the desire to conquer the client's favour by way of primary materials. The warmth of wood and the serenity of the greenery characterize the residences and are more often than not attractions sought by female buyers. Male buyers tend to be attracted to the image of imposing and technologically advanced space, as suggested by the metals and Gothic space of the garages. A highly attentive use of colours adds to the understanding of the spaces and their functions. The Dutch critic, Hans Ibelings, knew how to identify the characteristic traits of BIG's style – "clarity in their designs, simplicity in their concepts which make them easily accessible, easily digestible". It is enough to observe the project diagrams and the animations, in which Dutch school and Koolhaas influences in particular are visible. Some confusion remains in relation to the external areas. This project also seems to follow the totally contemporary tendency towards individualism in buildings. The public space is missing and the urban effect of the VM Houses, which was found by way of treatment of the ground areas between them, is not perceptible here. The excessive cost of the houses is another less than favourable point. A need to reconcile spatial and material quality with a final cost accessible to those of lesser means could be necessary. But the real challenge is the most stimulating: recreate a new standard for popular housing. Curiously surfing the internet for information on Utzon's houses would lead you to a visitor's description. These same words can be borrowed to describe the sensation one feels when visiting Mountain Dwellings: "the afternoon sun, the plants growing free, the clouds in the blue sky, that sensation of wellbeing in the air..."

Matteo Belfiore

BIG Mountain Dwellings

BIG Mountain Dwellings

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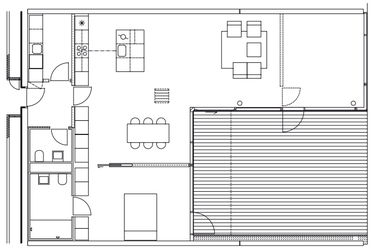
Typical apartment plan