

## Exhibit highlights architecture as product of its environment

By Phillip Kennicott

“Hot to Cold: An Odyssey of Architectural Adaptation,” at the National Building Museum, is obligatory for anyone who cares about architecture and museums. The exhibition, which opened Saturday, not only surveys the work of the Danish design firm Bjarke Ingels Group, it is also designed by the firm itself. BIG, as the company is known, is the same firm hired by the Smithsonian to remake its campus near the Castle on the Mall.

The 10-year-old design group manages to celebrate and explicate its own work without too much solipsism, while also offering an exceptional snapshot of the state of architecture today, the ideas, ideals and ideology that govern how buildings get made. It is also the first exhibition at the National Building Museum that manages to use the magnificent but cavernous central atrium of the Pension Building in a way that integrates exhibition design into the architectural setting.



A new exhibit by the Danish design firm set to redesign the Smithsonian's main campus.

--

This rendering of the Honeycomb Albany Marina Residences in the Bahamas envisions a building for the elite. On one facade, each balcony would include a small private swimming pool. (BIG/BIG)

Given the role that BIG will play in remaking one of the most matter what one may think of the \$2 billion initial plan the iconic landscapes in Washington, this is good news. Because no Smithsonian unveiled in November, the clarity and ingenuity of BIG's portfolio gives one confidence in the firm's ability to adapt, rethink and improve its Smithsonian designs.

## Exhibition's vast scope

The Building Museum has always been blessed and cursed with

its oversized home in the red-brick colossus near Judiciary Square. The atrium space, with its enormous faux-marble columns, is regularly used for events, which precludes using it for long-term exhibitions. So the actual museum spaces

are tucked into side rooms on the first and second floors. First-time visitors can be excused for wondering where exactly the museum is, and how it relates to the imposing grandeur of the great hall.

BIG solves this problem by suspending architectural models from the third floor so that they hang level with the second-floor arcade, which is lined with well-designed information panels set into spaces between the arcade columns. And so visitors are invited to look into the atrium as they study the models hanging there. The ingenious but relatively inexpensive suspension system, and the newly established connection between the exhibition and the great hall, is a coup for the museum. Problem solved.

The exhibition is huge, with more than 60 architectural models representing dozens of projects, including China, all across Europe and several in the United States. There are also videos, including one in which Ingels kneels on a large piece of paper on the floor. With the manic energy of a superheated TED talk, he sketches and talks, describing his firm's design philosophy. "Worldcraft" is one summation, the belief that we design our own human ecosystems, and should never be limited by technology or the status quo.

Another is "bigamy," the belief that one doesn't necessarily have to commit absolutely to one idea or another. Hybrids — a power plant that is also an urban ski mountain, a parking garage with

terraced housing on top — are always possible, and probably preferable.

The nasty word lurking all around this — nasty because it is so overused and has sunk into cliché — is "innovation," which today means something like a relentless playful creativity practiced by technically skilled people. Ingels perfectly embodies this image. Yet he manages the impossible: He gives innovation a good name.

The power plant-ski slope idea is, in fact, already under construction in Copenhagen. It generates electricity from garbage, greatly diminishing the amount of material that will end up in landfills. But to do this efficiently — without hauling garbage long distances — it had to be located in the city. The ski slope idea was an effort to forestall the "not in my back yard" resistance that almost always bedevils large and unglamorous infrastructure.

The ski slope is but one manifestation of a consistent tendency to find hybrids between landscape and architecture. A proposal for an unbuilt bridge near Stockholm would have used its supporting arch to create a public park. A Taiwanese resort project reproduces the profile of mountain peaks with the two-dimensional silhouette one might find in a Chinese painting. A private house for a Danish tech entrepreneur flows directly out of the green hill it surmounts.

The firm has a passion for fluid shapes, spirals, Möbius strips, twisted or overlapping curved forms. Yet there is a stronger connection between fanciful form and real-life functional needs than what is practiced by other, flashier organizations. In a slickly made video, Ingels explains the shape of Vancouver House, a complicated project using

a tricky piece of land at the foot of a highway bridge. It features a tower rising on a small base, which looks as if it has had a giant, curved slice cut off it. But the fanciful shape, Ingels explains, has to do with city requirements and minimum setbacks from the roadway.

The exhibition is also remarkably — though not entirely — candid. The designers acknowledge failed plans and the need for extensive revision. They do a good job explaining the politics of most projects, why two separate designs for an arts center in Park City, Utah, still haven't overcome local resistance. One of the most fascinating failures was a national library in Astana, Kazakhstan. After two years of design work and the construction of a massive foundation, the president of Kazakhstan decided to replace the BIG design with another one, by the London-based architect Norman Foster.

### 'Hedonistic modernism'

If the exhibition has a scherzo, it is this moment of dark comedy, trying to work in a deeply corrupt country with almost no press freedoms and an autocratic president who has never faced a serious or fair electoral challenge. Yet one might also ask why BIG got involved in this kind of nonsense in the first place. The firm is consistently progressive in its values — sustainability, social cohesion, cultural enrichment — but it also follows the money, building luxury hotels, a “man cave” for an Arab prince, and a sumptuous condo project in the tax-shelter Bahamas in which private balconies also feature mini- swimming pools.

Thus BIG manifests what might be called the polyphonic ethics of contemporary architecture. Rather than one clear, confident sense of what is right and wrong, there are multiple voices, so the ear is always distracted from the darker themes. If you're working for a sheik in a country where women are second-class citizens, stress the culturally simpatico use of Arabian design elements. If you're building a pleasure palace for the one-percenters in the Caribbean, emphasize the solar orientation and energy efficiency, and the complexity of the design problem. If you're working for an all- powerful president who may have siphoned a billion dollars of oil revenue into his own pocket, focus on the need for cultural

landmarks and national identity in an emerging post-Soviet republic.

Everyone does it. The difference is BIG does it with a palpable sense of self-irony, even calling its service to the billionaire class an exercise in “hedonistic modernism.” That doesn't excuse it.

But at least the company has the design skill to do whatever it does with intellectual virtuosity. And the vast majority of the projects — and, one senses, the basic heart of the operation — are progressive, driven by a powerful desire to improve lives, reform cities and build with a minimal impact on the environment. In most everything it does, BIG clearly wants to be part of the solution, not the problem, even if what it can offer is only a nudge in the right direction.

It is that spirit that gives some measure of hope that the Smithsonian project will evolve. Because the main problem isn't what BIG has designed, it's the design brief it was given by the Smithsonian.

*“Hot to Cold: An Odyssey of Architectural Adaptation” is on view at the National Building Museum. For more information, visit [www.nbm.org](http://www.nbm.org).*