

Towering Infernal

JUSTIN SHUBOW | 7 MIN READ



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In June, *Wired* unveiled the plans for the most important building to be constructed in New York since the Freedom Tower: Two World Trade Center. The design is by the rising Danish star Bjarke Ingels, who ousted the previously selected eminent architect Sir Norman Foster.

The real estate magnate Larry Silverstein has ownership of the colossal project, and the main tenants will be 21st Century Fox and News Corp. James Murdoch, incoming CEO of Fox, is responsible for choosing Ingels, saying that he thought Foster's design, a glass office building with a sloped diamond top, was too staid and corporate. Murdoch sought something more fitting for a modern media company. He knew that Ingels's designs have a reputation for being avant-garde and flashy, a wild sketch on a napkin made real.

Two World Trade Center will be the fourth and final building at the former World Trade Center site, which, as the location of Ground Zero, may arguably be the most sacred 16 acres in America. Not only will the skyscraper be of great symbolic and civic importance, it will, at 1,340 feet, irrevocably shape Manhattan's skyline as the third tallest building in the city. Its top is nearly as tall as the Freedom Tower's roof. From certain vantage points on the ground, the two buildings will appear to be twin towers.

The well-known design of Freedom Tower (officially One WTC) by David Childs is that of a glass skyscraper that narrows as it ascends, each of its chamfered sides sloping inward. It tops out, anticlimactically, in a flat roof pierced by a scrawny radio pole. The work is reminiscent of a syringe, and is just as inspiring. The other buildings on the site are Three WTC by Sir Richard Rogers and Four WTC by Fumihiko Maki. Both are snoozeworthy generic glass office buildings.

Directly adjacent to the Freedom Tower, Two WTC is an asymmetrical series of slick glass boxes stacked like steps. The seven giant boxes, each as large as an office building, decrease in size as the building ascends. At each setback there is a rooftop garden: Hanging gardens of Babylon in the sky (never mind the high winds). In the interior of each terrace level there is a large atrium intended to contain a café.

The most striking aspect of the design is that the piled boxes are cantilevered toward the Freedom Tower: each box overhangs the one beneath it. The effect is to tilt the new building toward the skyscraper. The angle of the tilt is precisely the same as that of the latter's sloped façade; the parallelism thus accentuates the appearance of a leaning tower.

It is appropriate that the man behind the huge 2.8-million-square-foot tower is Bjarke Ingels since he is the Next Big Thing in architecture. Supremely confident and ambitious, he named his firm BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group) and chose the cocky web address big.dk. Despite being only 40—a spring chicken in architectural years—he has already achieved tremendous success around the world.

Ingels has been winning more and more important and immense commissions, such as Google's glass-canopied headquarters; VIA, an 860,000-square-foot pyramidal apartment building on West 57th Street at the Hudson River; a \$335 million section of the Dryline, a 10-mile-long flood barrier on the East River; and the \$2 billion expansion of the Smithsonian Institution. He is also building a waste-to-energy plant in Copenhagen that doubles as a ski slope.

Ingels, who lives in Tribeca, is also a journalist's dream: tousled hair, three-day stubble, and rock-star good looks; cool sneakers and black T-shirts with deep V-necks; a vintage Porsche; eminently quotable. He casually curses in interviews and in public talks. The press cannot find enough superlatives for the charismatic charmer: whiz kid, *Wunderkind*, It Boy, enfant terrible. He is likely the first architect to accept (self-knowingly) the once-derogatory appellation "starchitect." But he is more than that; he sees himself as a superhero coming to save the day. His self-promotional manifesto *Yes Is More* is in the form of a comic book.

This self-described futurist speaks like a nonstop TED talk, combining neologisms ("pragmatic utopianism," "hedonistic sustainability") with up-to-date pop culture references to *Game of Thrones*, the movie *Inception*, the computer game Minecraft. A master of self-promotion, Ingels released a gripping video advertisement for Two WTC with stunning computer graphics. A savvy user of Instagram, Twitter, and other social media, he is the progenitor of starchitecture 2.0.

In choosing the maximalist motto "Yes is more," Ingels positions himself as surpassing two famous architectural slogans: Mies van der Rohe's "Less is more" and Robert Venturi's "Less is a bore." Ingels says he is inspired by science fiction, especially the novels of Philip K. Dick. He says that he aims "to turn surreal dreams into inhabitable space" and to "gently alter the course of history." His favorite philosopher is Nietzsche; and like the Übermensch, he is a joyful creator of new values.

Indeed, Ingels intends to overcome what he believes to be the total failure of contemporary architecture. He explains that starchitecture has been innovative but dysfunctional, whereas responsible, rational design has been typified by banal boxes. He claims to be offering a third way, combining the best of both worlds.

Whether or not Ingels is the Superman savior of architecture, however, Two WTC is a failure. An alleged hybrid of office building, garden, and Tribeca vernacular, it is a generic structure that could belong as easily in Dubai or Hong Kong. But for its reference to the wedding cake setbacks of 1920s and 1930s New York skyscrapers, there is nothing about the design that relates to the city. Ironically, given his disdain for banal boxes, his building is merely an assemblage of them: Boring in concept, it shows as much creativity as a child's stack of Legos.

But Two WTC is a failure for a more important, and simple, reason: It looks like it is about to topple over. It doesn't take an expert eye to see this; it doesn't even require conscious judgment. When we see something off-kilter, our intuitive understanding of the forces of physics causes us to worry about its stability. We also know, subconsciously, that cantilevers are sites of mechanical stress, with the millions of pounds of weight challenging a building's structural integrity. That the tower appears to be tilted is not my imagination: Ingels admits that it "feels like it's a completely straightforward tower, but then there's something weird going on, that it seems to lean with One World Trade Center."

To build a weird tower seemingly on the verge of collapse at the site of the former World Trade Center goes beyond bad taste; it constitutes gross negligence. Two World Trade Center, like the three nearby towers at the site, ought to look as permanent and stable as possible: impregnable buildings that could survive a strike from an airliner. But Ingels's tower appears to need only a breeze or tremor to send it crashing down—bringing the Freedom Tower with it.

Although Ingels has said that his dream is to design Barack Obama's presidential library—Yes Is More meets Yes We Can—and that he supports the nationalization of banks, it is unfair to impute subversive intent in his project for the News Corp. media empire. Ingels calls himself a capitalist and eagerly sought to build a state library for the dictatorial regime in Kazakhstan. But like many architects practicing today, Ingels does not care whether buildings evince the traditional architectural values of order and stability, and he is oblivious to what ought to be obvious mental associations in design. This should come as no surprise, since a recent empirical study has shown that contemporary architects' evaluations of buildings are not only vastly different from those of non-architects, architects are unable even to *predict* ordinary people's responses to new buildings.

Bjarke Ingels, alas, is not the only oblivious party. Blame for the negligence must be also placed on the tenants, who have been bamboozled by an exuberant showman. It is imperative that the leaders of Fox and News Corp. open their eyes and trust their feelings. Ingels's stairway to nowhere is not a *fait accompli*. There is still time to replace his plan with something morally and tectonically upright.

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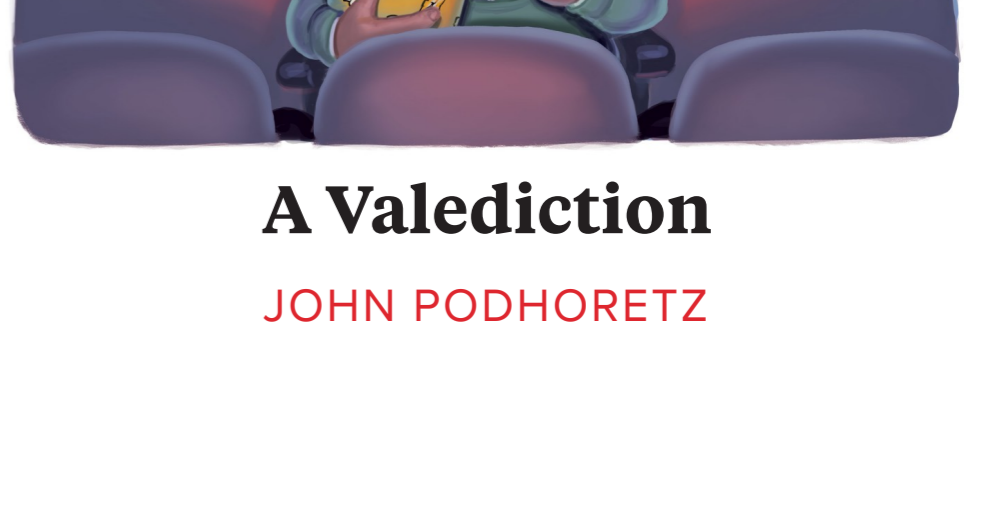
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