

Ole Scheeren: form follows fiction

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Ole Scheeren is an international architect who has gained global recognition through his designs for innovative high-rise buildings, residential communities and cultural institutions. With offices in Hong Kong, Beijing, Berlin and London, his work ranges from well-known buildings – including The Interlace in Singapore, and the CCTV headquarters and the Guardian Art Center in Beijing – to artistic installations, such as the outdoor cinema series.

For Scheeren, architecture is an organism interwoven with life. He conceives prototypes that redefine once-separate domains such as living and working, public and private, and culture and commerce, by designing spaces that are centred on people's needs and experiences.

A large-scale solo exhibition of the German-born architect, showing at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, explores how architecture becomes a stage for people's lives and narratives.

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Ole Scheeren: form follows fiction

Architecture is both a functional response to our needs and an emotionally charged experience that is an essential part of our lives.

When form follows function, architecture is limited to utilitarian problem-solving. It offers no more than is asked of it. When form follows finance, preconceptions about the market rule out all but the status quo. But what if **form follows fiction**? Architecture could become the sum of the experiences, emotions and memories that it creates.

To understand fiction as offering a useful design tool for architecture is to be neither indulgent, nor whimsical. It is to think of architecture as the product of the stories, both real and imagined, and of the people who inhabit it. Such narratives can offer speculative prototypes for how places in which we live, work and share can be organised and experienced.

It is a two-way process: as architects, we speculate on the role of architecture as a stage for people on which to live their lives. At the same time, all those who experience architecture, whether as residents of an apartment tower, or as citizens who perceive that building as an urban landmark, have their own stories and memories of living with it.

To realise this potential, architecture needs to go beyond plan, programme and diagram. It should be understood as a dynamic system of configuration, complexity and narrative rather than one based on the classical repertoire of composition, proportion and materials. We should think of buildings as living organisms – not simply inorganic matter or the product of artistic expression.

Analysis allows us to understand the constraints of a project, but the aim is not to merely follow the rules. It is to find ways to rewrite the rule book by using its own logic, to go beyond the brief, to question the status quo and propose the re-reading of a situation.

We no longer live in a world in which everything is clearly delineated or separated. In the search for new architectural possibilities, complexity and its elusiveness is an important quality.

Even the most logical outcomes may not be the result of a supposedly logical process. Architecture cannot rely on the myth of linearity between analysis and outcomes. Research, narrative speculation, design exploration and post rationalisation all interact with each other simultaneously.

The most resonant architectural experiences are those that are not limited to a single meaning. They embody the freedom for multiple stories and experiences to unfold throughout a building, allowing for meanings that can change over time and evolving narratives. We measure their success by the extent to which they make the user more than a passive consumer and project them into the role of an active participant.

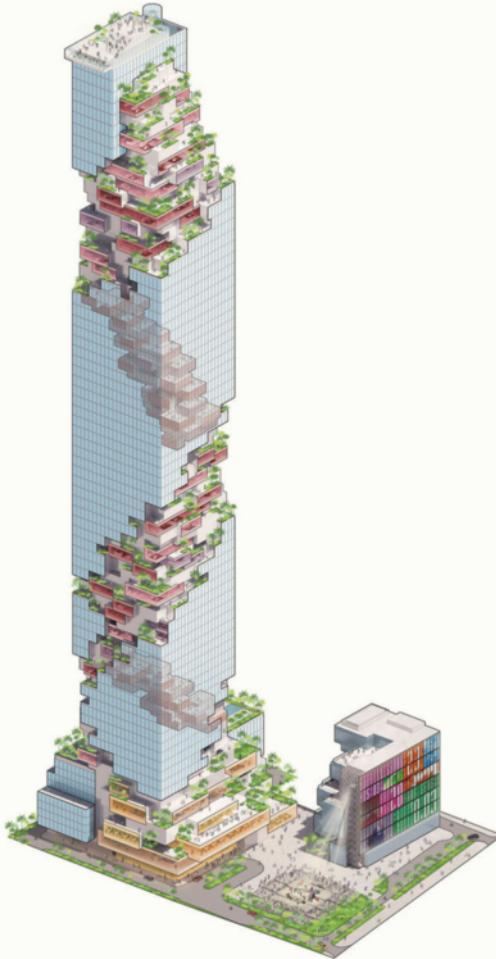


deyan sudjic: an architecture of ideas

The invisible but razor-sharp line that segregated what were once described as commercial architects, who built generic office blocks and everyday shopping malls, from the much smaller group that designed universities and museums and got talked about by architectural critics, evaporated some time before Ole Scheeren set up his studio in 2010. Culturally ambitious architects could see that, to continue to be relevant in a rapidly changing world, they would need to move beyond the scale of the exquisite. Commercial practices had begun to understand that they needed to offer more than pragmatism if an increasingly sophisticated new generation of clients was going to hire them. But there is still a divide between those architects who are seen primarily as builders, and those who are better known for their ideas.

Scheeren is interested both in ideas and in building, and he might be understood as the embodiment of the new reality of contemporary architectural practice. He is an architect who has immersed himself in the sometimes half-hidden constraints of planning and finance that shape and structure most buildings, along with the specific requirements of his clients. But he also uses his understanding of those constraints to radically transform the expected outcomes, so as to address the wider needs and expectations of the community.

In the 12 years since he set up his own architectural practice, Scheeren has completed a series of striking projects, each of which offers an influential redefinition of a particular building type, from the skyscraper to the hotel. The pixellated form of the King Power Mahanakhon tower in Bangkok, for example, creates a powerful and instantly recognisable landmark – not an easy task in the context of a city that already has one tower modelled on a robot, another on an elephant, and a third on an Egyptian pyramid. The spiralling gash in the smoothly



orthogonal tower gives a sense of scale to the tallest building in Thailand and, equally importantly, it disrupts the conventional form of high-rise architecture to offer a richer spatial structure that allows for multiple uses. Its height, substantially greater than was originally envisaged by the client, provides the economic underpinning for the whole project. It was made possible by Scheeren's rational analysis of the zoning conditions for the site, and yet the pixellated fracture of the tower hints at the highly poetic idea of nature invading technology.

The distinctive form of the Mahanakhon tower and its visible terraces is the product of Scheeren's search for a way to give high-rise buildings a visual connection with those on the ground, a search that he dates back to his early experience of standing at the foot of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. At a time when so many towers had diminished into bland boxes, the challenge was to make evident the human presence inside a very tall structure. As the skyscraper has become the dominant building type of our times, it is an issue that has clearly preoccupied many architects, and Scheeren's approach in Bangkok has influenced a new generation of tall buildings around the world.

Like the Mahanakhon tower, which emerged from an analysis of the zoning rules of Bangkok, the DUO project in Singapore, a joint development by the government of the city state and its neighbour, Malaysia, is also the product of a creative manipulation of planning conditions. One of its two towers accommodates a hotel and offices, the other is residential. Following the existing zoning plan would have cut the site in half with two isolated towers. By carving circular urban spaces into the permitted building envelope, Scheeren was able to repair a broken part of the city and integrate the neighbouring buildings



Top, the King Power Mahanakhon tower in Bangkok has a façade featuring three-dimensional pixels that reveal human activity and merge the tropical outdoors with the indoors

Above, the Guardian Art Center, near Beijing's Forbidden City, is a hybrid project housing both cultural and commercial spaces

Opposite, completed in 2013, The Interlace is a vertical village of living and social spaces integrated with the natural environment

in a new coherent context and urban plan. The sculpting of the two towers through adding volumes in some areas, while subtracting it from others made a dynamic yet unified outcome possible, further reinforced by lush public gardens that embrace the whole site.



Also in Singapore, The Interlace development is an equally significant contribution to another typology, the evolution of large-scale high-density urban housing. Within the context of a limited construction budget, The Interlace escapes the constraints of vertical living, which is typically based on repetitive floor plans in isolated towers defined by lift cores. By stacking blocks of horizontally planned apartments grouped around a sequence of private, semi-private and public spaces and gardens, The Interlace offers a much richer social ecology.

In Beijing, the Guardian Art Center is a remarkable mixture of uses; part auction house, part art gallery and event arena, and part hotel, it is designed to embody the historical significance of its location very close to the Forbidden City. Meanwhile, Scheeren's design for a beach resort now under construction in Sanya Bay, on the tropical Chinese island of Hainan, stacks two hotels one on top of the other, structuring them around thickly-planted open-air garden decks and pools that offer a model for incorporating nature within the built environment.

His unrealised projects in central Berlin and London's Stratford district would have offered equally compelling insights into the potential of the contemporary versions respectively of the headquarters office building in the age of working from home, and the museum complex at a time of cultural uncertainty.

Working in Vancouver, Shenzhen, Ho Chi Minh City, Frankfurt and the Philippines among other places, Büro Ole Scheeren is the model of a global architectural practice. It is a model that has proved itself through two years of pandemic travel restrictions, and continual Zoom calls across multiple time zones.

Scheeren has always been fascinated by the architectural thinkers, but he was never going to be content with

restricting himself to critical theory or paper architecture. He had started to build even when he was still a teenager, working on construction sites of projects designed with his father, also an architect, before he arrived in London as a student.

When he was at the Architectural Association, he got to know Cedric Price, an English architect with a formidable reputation as a theorist, despite having built almost nothing. Price's way of unmooring architecture from the dictates of space and time by asking provocative questions has clearly had an impact on his own work. According to Price, there was no reason that a university should not become a distributed think belt rather than tie itself to a single site. Scheeren was also interested in the Archigram group's wildest concept, that of the walking city, and he read a lot of Situationist texts. But in his view, ideas have their greatest impact when they get built, and Archigram built even less than Cedric Price.

Scheeren belongs to what may well be the last generation that learned to draw using ink on tracing paper. It's not something that he is sentimental about, but he is aware of the impact that the technique has had on his understanding of analogue reality. He is also young enough to have grown up with the first video games. Their low-resolution rendering of the world has fed into his use of 'pixelation' to form the Bangkok tower, and his designs for the Springer HQ in Berlin.

As a teenager in Karlsruhe, southwestern Germany, in the 1980s, he was building architectural models for local firms to help him to understand the three-dimensional implications of a two-dimensional drawing. It gave him the skills that have underpinned envisioning the complex spatial geometries of his more recent buildings.

Model building also earned him enough to buy his first car. He used it to set off to see as much architecture as he could, from Le Corbusier to Mies van der Rohe and Hans Scharoun. Evidently, it was the spatial complexity of Scharoun that he found more interesting than Mies' aristocratic restraint. At the same time, he developed an all-consuming interest in art-house cinema, which has had a profound impact on his approach to architecture. The local cinema programmed all-night triple-bill screenings, from Jim Jarmusch to Akira Kurosawa, in a 1,000-seat red plush and gold auditorium. Scheeren found movies seen in that way, as a shared event rather than from a solitary sofa at home, were always an intensely emotional experience. He looked for a similarly intense quality in architecture, but it was hard to find.

It's not that he sees architecture as entertainment or believes that it should be a Hollywood-like experience, even if drama and a narrative arc can be a useful architectural strategy. Nor is it his objective to try to treat architecture as a frame-by-frame recreation of a film. But cinema has been a useful starting point for him in finding a strategy for architecture that goes beyond utilitarian functionalism in pursuit of a richer experience. He talks about using fiction to trigger architectural responses, to imagine the lives of those who will inhabit his architecture, and the interaction between user and building. He even suggests that architecture can take the form of a script. The energy that he has poured into designing and building a series of dreamlike temporary open-air cinemas, including one floating off a beach on the coast of Thailand, and another in the Venice lagoon, reflects his understanding of the power architectural spaces can have in animating social experiences.

Scheeren makes sustainability an essential aspect of every project, from the consideration of the embodied carbon saved by reusing the concrete structure of a 1970s office tower in Frankfurt to make new apartments for the

Above, The Interlace's 31 six-storey apartment blocks are stacked to create lush courtyards, rooftop gardens and an intricate network of living and social spaces integrated with nature

Opposite, top, at the core of the future office building. Collaborative Cloud in Berlin is a space of knowledge, collaboration and exchange

Opposite, bottom, the Empire City Tower in Ho Chi Minh City fuses city and landscape into a new public city centre

Riverpark Tower, to the incorporation of nature in The Interlace residences in Singapore, where roof gardens and landscaped courtyards give the development more green surface than would be offered by the unbuilt site itself. These are not window boxes or planters, but gardens with communal access, stocked with flower and fruit-bearing plants, where 50 or more species of butterflies and birds have been counted. Cantilevered slabs and projecting balconies help to shadow the windows and courtyards from the fierce tropical sun. Carefully sited pools offer relief from high temperatures through evaporative cooling. Scheeren's approach to sustainability is to use it as an aspect of a poetic architectural experience rather than merely meeting a bureaucratic standard, though, of course, his projects do that too.

In 1995, Scheeren went to the Netherlands to work with Rem Koolhaas, an architect whose ambiguous view of the creative tension between the architecture of ideas and the architecture of building interested him. He arrived in Rotterdam when Koolhaas had only just begun to build; his office, OMA, was still a modest size. He was with OMA when Miuccia Prada came to the studio for advice on reconfiguring her shops, and in so doing, transformed Koolhaas' practice. Scheeren worked on Prada's New York and Beverly Hills flagship stores. He went to China in 2002, by then as an OMA partner, to take part in the competition to design a new HQ for China Central Television. He spent the next decade in Beijing, during its most intense paroxysm of new construction, that also saw Herzog & de Meuron's Olympic stadium and Norman Foster's airport completed. He was the architectural leader of a team that included as many as 400 people and, in contrast to all the other western architectural



principals, who flew in to visit and then went home again, Scheeren actually lived in China.

Unlike many of the production line of talented, ambitious and highly plausible architects emerging from OMA to set up on their own, Scheeren was a partner when he left. He had been given the freedom by Koolhaas to explore his own architectural interests and was able to take a couple of projects that he had designed with him and to build them on his own account. But while some architects establish themselves after leaving a partnership by going out of their way to create a new architectural language to symbolise a break in the most visible way, Scheeren decided that he could not turn his back on the ideas he had developed during his time at OMA, nor did he want to. While the CCTV building will always be associated with Koolhaas, it was Scheeren who headed the design team, moved to Beijing in 2004 when the project first broke ground, and spent several years of his life supervising the day-to-day work realising one of the world's most demanding and intense architectural projects. It was Scheeren, in a hard hat, high-visibility vest and boots who was on site in Beijing on the day that the cantilevered steel structures of the two main towers were finally connected to make one continuous loop of interconnected volumes. And he was the first to take the leap across the completed connection.

Building CCTV established Scheeren's credibility. It is a complex that accommodates 10,000 people, and demanded the most sophisticated construction techniques, skills that Chinese contractors were still in the process of acquiring. It also established his continuing connection with Asia that began with backpacking in rural China over 30 years ago and matured when he went to Bangkok to work on the 'Cities on the Move' exhibition in the late 1990s, just after a financial crisis had left its skyline littered with half-built abandoned high-rises.

Since starting his own studio, Scheeren has worked to show that he is an architect who is as capable of an



architecture of ideas, as he is of building them. China gave him the opportunities he needed to establish himself and develop a global practice. It also gave him the experience of a culture able to embrace apparently contradictory positions simultaneously, to build and to think.

Scheeren has developed a framework for conceiving a distinctive approach to architecture. It is not one based on a singular architectural signature. But it can be described as putting an emphasis on what buildings can be, and on giving them a strong identity and presence in unexpected, even surreal ways. What counts is what buildings mean, and what they can offer in terms of experiences, rather than developing expensive forms and skins that have little impact on how buildings work.

The term 'client' is sometimes regarded as an abstraction, a cipher for the architect to manipulate, a barrier to be overcome in pursuit of their creative ambitions and on which to project their frustrations. For an architect such as Scheeren, who is building radical work, to do so would be a naïve and self-defeating attitude. The client cannot be treated as an enemy. Scheeren has the ability to use concepts that his clients can understand, and it is the key to unlocking architecture from a complex brief.

In Vancouver, the Fifteen Fifteen residential tower does it by introducing a horizontal element into the vertical emphasis of a 42-floor structure and cantilevering a proportion of the 200-plus apartments out into space. It is a conscious evocation of the glamour of Pierre Koenig's glass box Case Study house in the Hollywood

Hills, as portrayed in Julius Shulman's famous photograph, that transforms the building's silhouette, and increases the value of the mid-level apartments. He also showed the developer the benefit to his business plan of making one of the cantilevered horizontal spaces available to all residents rather than keeping it private.

Scheeren's initial presentations tend to include enough shock value to attract attention, but are underpinned by the research and detailed analysis needed to provide the necessary reassurance.

Scheeren has a repertoire of techniques and ideas about architecture that he uses to explore the full potential of the situations that his clients ask him to confront, but they are not the ultimate objectives. The important thing is to put them to work effectively to go beyond what is explicitly asked of him by his client. In Vietnam, for example, Scheeren's brief was to design a building whose height alone would make it a national landmark. He did much more. Hurling a fragment of what looks like a tier of rice fields at the 80th floor of the Empire City Tower in Ho Chi Minh City and leaving it surrealistically floating in space high above the Saigon river is hinting at the language of Situationism; it is like the radicals of Paris in 1968, discovering the beach beneath the pavement. But in Scheeren's version, the metaphor is a symbolic evocation of the Vietnamese landscape, that will be a magical public space, and the tower is a landmark that will define the future of one of Asia's fastest growing cities.

Below, currently under construction, Sanya Horizons, on China's Hainan Island, embraces the lush tropical landscape and ocean views

Opposite, the Empire City, also under construction, lifts a piece of nature into the sky to create a new public space



Scheeren's ultimate objective is driven by the belief that architecture has responsibility to society and to the public, and he looks to acknowledge it in each of his projects.



eric chen: against the currents of convention

Looking back at Beijing, circa 2010 – when globalisation felt unstoppable, and opportunities seemed limitless – one might be struck by how much has changed. Globalisation as we've known it is, of course, headed out the window. And that sense of unlimited opportunity that we all had felt back then has yielded to a more foreboding sense of growing crisis.

Yet when one speaks with him now, Scheeren seems unfazed. More than a decade after completing the CCTV headquarters for OMA, that impossibly cantilevered leviathan in Beijing – and despite an unravelling geopolitical landscape, and China's Covid-closed borders – he still speaks of his ongoing interest in the country, and Asia generally.

No doubt this is reinforced by the fact that Scheeren's largest projects, in both scale and impact, have been in the region: the Guardian Art Center, also in Beijing; The Interlace and DUO complexes in Singapore; the King Power Mahanakhon tower in Bangkok.

In each, Scheeren applied his inventive capacity to rethink architectural form – as a function of typology, program, regulation and economics – to achieve a result that may have previously seemed improbable. He is an architect inclined towards the unorthodox and even counterintuitive, who harbours a nearly irrepressible impulse to go against the grain. His mode of operating might be described as a 'series of inverse efforts to swim against the currents of convention and expectation'.

If this is the defining characteristic of his work, it also applies to his practice more broadly. From his earliest days in China, Scheeren insisted he was not one of those architects to parachute into the country during its unprecedented building boom and simply impart foreign expertise in exchange for a plum commission. He had grander schemes in mind: to reverse the flow of ideas, so to speak, by seeing not only what China could learn from the West, but what the West could learn from China.

And so, there was a logic to be found when Scheeren opened his Berlin office in 2015 and London in 2018 as part of his globally expanding work. The research and methodologies he honed in Asia could be applied in Europe and North America to produce, as he now puts it, 'new qualities of life'. Current projects such as the Fifteen Fifteen skyscraper in Vancouver and Riverpark Tower in Frankfurt show the imprint of his learnings in Asia applied to a Western context. Of course, at this political moment, advocating such cross-directional exchanges is a 'notion that has become even more challenging than it was before,' he acknowledges. But knowing Scheeren, this will only prompt him to double down, as he – and all of us who remember a more open world, however flawed, and its forward-looking possibilities – very well should.

CCTV's loop has become a national symbol, photo opportunity, pop culture icon and urban landmark since its completion in 2012







In the 12 years since Ole Scheeren established his own studio, he has worked on more than 100 projects in a deeply globalised practice, from China and Southeast Asia to Europe and North America. The German architect, who has had an address in ten different countries, lives the globalism he practices.

joseph giovannini:
form-giver, space-maker





The sheer quantity, quality and originality of Scheeren's work in a short dozen years, and the current momentum of his portfolio of large-scale projects, has clearly established an independence of accomplishment and stature. In China especially, he is his own brand, but he has also been rapidly working his way west, with relatively recent beachheads in North America.

At a time when the basics of architecture, such as the floor plan and section, have been swamped by social, theoretical and environmental issues – which Scheeren respects through a practice that stresses the experience and wellbeing of the user – what distinguishes Scheeren's work is that the architect is an inventive form-giver who also succeeds at inventive space-making. He uses both form and space not as objects per se, but as tools to cultivate the environment and enrich living conditions, with experiential and emotional dividends for the occupants. Often he teases apart typologies to create geometries that break through pat form to create fresh living conditions.

During the past several years, for example, he has operated on two common, internationally ubiquitous typologies. In two notable projects, the Fifteen Fifteen tower in Canada and the Shenzhen Wave in China, he sectionalises each typological form, and then manipulates the sections systematically. The design process is analytical and structural rather than intuitive and organic. His inventive and systematic analysis avoids repetitive signature and the captivity of a singular 'style'.

With the first typology, the Fifteen Fifteen tower in Vancouver, now under construction, the size and density of the site determined the morphology of a point tower extruded from a base. But in plan, Scheeren divided the extrusion into a grid of ten parts that square the core, each section of the grid treated separately from the others. Some rise in the shaft like pistons, creating differentiated silhouettes and spaces at the base and top of the tower. In the usually passive, financially low-performing

shaft, he breaks the tube with long boxes cantilevered at 90 degrees from each other, pointed toward water views or toward views of the surrounding city and park.

At the top, bottom and middle, he creates exceptional spaces that otherwise are usually conform to the structural cage. The spatial and formal exceptions to the rule permit double-height glass-enclosed spaces and open terraces projecting acrobatically into thin air. Featuring warm natural woods and stones, the interiors are breathtaking – you are living in the sky – and from the street, the design forms a fascinating 3D-puzzle. Despite its arresting profile, the tower is structurally conventional and highly buildable from an engineering point of view.

In a second typology in Shenzhen, China – a building called the Shenzhen Wave – he has operated on the dominantly horizontal office block much as he did in the vertical point tower in Vancouver. By sliding floor plates in the x and y dimensions systematically past each other, he creates terraces and double-height spaces on all four sides. He lifts the block off the ground to form, at grade, public space and an open urban landscape.

In this block, as in the tower, he uses geometric exceptionalism to carve out unexpected spaces for unusual uses. At the base of one end of the block, and at the roof at opposite end, he digitally generates shells of compound curves in formal contradiction to the straight-line floor plates of the block, whose footprint covers more than two football fields. The upside-down dome at the bottom heaves up into the block, breaking open space that drifts up at an oblique angle to a corresponding dome-like shell on the roof, forming along its diagonal path a dynamic social trajectory through the huge floor plates. The vectorial gesture, like a spatial force, breaks through the stratification and social isolation typical of pancaked floors. This interior landscaped plaza spills through space, connecting floors and people, creating an environmentally rich space that humanises and naturalises the interior.

Above, an HQ for a technology company, the Shenzhen Wave reasserts the importance of physical space and collaboration as incubators of new ideas

Opposite, top, with the Riverpark Tower in Frankfurt, an existing concrete office building is being converted into a residential high-rise to reduce grey-energy emissions

Opposite, bottom, currently under construction in Vancouver, the Fifteen Fifteen tower reaches out to connect city and nature in a three-dimensional sculpture

My connection with Ole Scheeren came about in 1997, when I was co-curating the first 'Cities on the Move' exhibition in Vienna with Hou Hanru and we wanted to explore the reciprocal relationships between Asian culture and the West, just as the Secession itself had been deeply inspired by Asian art in the late 19th century. The wheels have been spinning in both directions ever since.

From Vienna, the exhibition went to the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain in Bordeaux, then on to MoMA PS1 in New York, Denmark's Louisiana Museum, and London's Hayward Gallery. Here we asked Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren to collaborate on its scenography to create a radically different show. We all started to build this city together across the gallery spaces. It was very prescient, as we reused bits of the preceding exhibitions.

'Cities on the Move' involved more than 120 architects and became this sprawling growth, much like an Asian megacity. When the exhibition moved to Bangkok, its only Asian iteration, we knew that someone had to be on the ground to reconceive the exhibition and transform it into an active dialogue with the city. Very early on at the Hayward Gallery, Ole had talked about 'form follows fiction' and this became his guiding hypothesis for the Bangkok version of 'Cities on the Move' – the idea of an exhibition that takes part in the far future. It gave him

the opportunity to explore his fascination with Asia and, in a sense, the Bangkok exhibition became the prequel to his move to China a few years later to realise the CCTV HQ in Beijing that he had designed together with Rem.

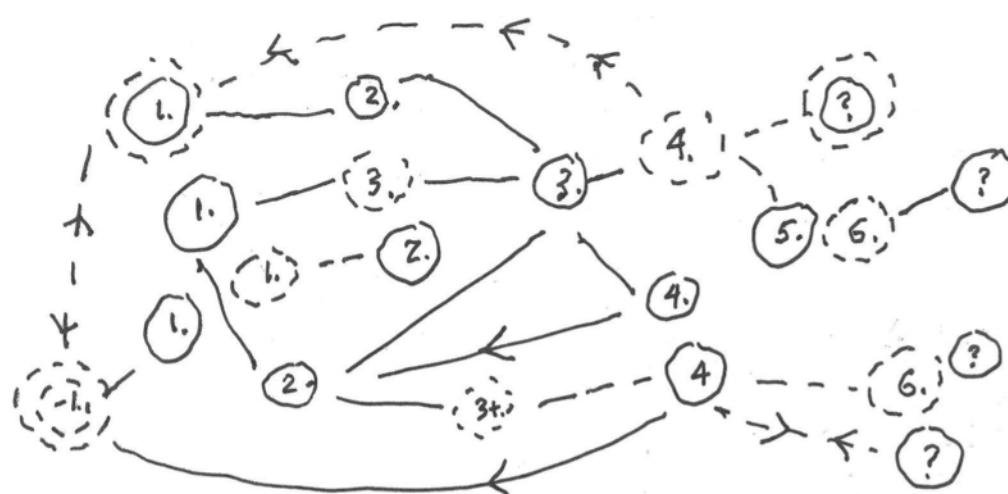
'Cities on the Move – Bangkok' was an activity within the city itself, occupying shopping malls, schools, etc. It was part of a thread that linked the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s with the new Asian megastructures of the 20th century. Ole spent many months conceiving the time-space continuum of the exhibition, convincing a multitude of local communities to participate in the process. 'Cities on the Move' became a sort of 'archipelago' of a show, rather than a unified single continent. There was no actual catalogue, but rather a collection of objects, from VHS tapes to postcards, stickers, even a uniform.

Looking at later projects by Ole's office, such as the King Power Mahanakhon tower in Bangkok, it is easy to see the connection to these early interests and explorations. It almost appears to be a digital building, something that bridges the world of real and virtual. With the DUO mixed-use project in Singapore, there's a symbiosis between these two towers – they create a relationship that goes beyond the buildings themselves to turn them into a kind of urban nucleus.

Below, a sketch by the influential British architect Cedric Price based on a conversation with Scheeren on the exhibition 'Cities on the Move – Bangkok'

Opposite, completed in 2018, the King Power Mahanakhon tower in Bangkok opens up the mute shaft of the generic skyscraper and connects to the scale of the city

hans ulrich obrist: fictions becoming reality



Everything is about connections – between people, places, things. Ole's projects actively shape these connections, just like we did with 'Cities on the Move'. His buildings carry forward much of the legacy of things we were exploring within the exhibition, such as the symbiosis between architecture and public space. His idea that form follows fiction epitomises the storytelling of the exhibitions we had all worked on together.





cao fei: solidifying time



Ole and I first met over a decade ago when he was working on the iconic China Central Television HQ in Beijing. Shortly after, in 2012, when he was guest editor of *Wallpaper** magazine, he invited me to design a special cover and that marked our first collaboration.

When I was shooting the film *La Town* (2014), I needed a model of a museum for its final sequence. I turned to Ole for help and what he offered me became one of the most significant structures in the storytelling – the Night Museum (a space that only opens after dusk and contains the history and memories of La Town). I imagine it was a bold decision for Ole, a successful architect, to allow his work in my worlds; perhaps he trusted that the collaboration would give his design a life in another dimension.

Another museum, however, that exists in reality and impacted me is Ole's Guardian Art Center in Beijing. It's a departure from the typology of his CCTV skyscraper in Beijing's Central Business District, which was built at the start of the new millennium when bold and radical new statements were desired. In contrast, he took a subdued approach when creating the Guardian Art Center, which, in my opinion, has become a tranquil and subtle presence right in the heart of the city. The art centre is located east of the Forbidden City, in an area we call the 'Root of the Imperial City', where new buildings must harmonise with the surrounding ancient establishments and hutongs. The straight-lined art centre is unequivocally contemporary, but the choice of material, particularly the glass bricks used for the upper part of the building, are in harmony with the muscle of the historic city wall. Its colour echoes the blue bricks favoured in ancient architecture, all of which project a sense of majesty and provide a visual connection with Beijing's history.

The light that falls through the thousands of circular openings that perforate the lower portion of the building's grey stone façades illuminates all of the structure's features. It seems as if old and new memories of the city and its inhabitants whisper in these light spots. From where I stand, all of these elements together convey a sense of majesty and offer a concrete connection between our contemporary lives and Beijing's history.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the National Art Museum of China and the Guardian Art Center symbolises a bridge between the past and the future. The former is often referred to as the birthplace of the city's modern culture and art, while the Guardian Art Center, as a new art space and cultural landmark, embodies the creation and incubation of the city's future cultural and artistic development.

In contrast to an architect, whose job is to solve the practical problems of the real world, an artist has no other parties to serve. A city is a medium for me, a window through which to observe people and an opportunity to experiment with society. I reflect and react to the evolution of a city – beginning with reality and adding a little fantasy; it doesn't have to be fictional, but there must be a dramatic element.

Left, completed in 2018, the Guardian Art Center links Beijing's past, present and future by combining scales, materials and textures of the historic and contemporary city

Ole's work solidifies time and collective wisdom to form our reality while providing me with a foundation for limitless exploration and experimentation.

As I understand it, Ole's philosophy of 'form follows fiction' is the idea that buildings are made around the idea of stories, and that these stories – behavioural patterns, communities, human relations and interactions – form the fabric of the buildings. This resonates with my own creative process as a director.

As a trained architect myself – albeit one who has never actually practised or built anything – the way I look at cinema and filmmaking relies on an architectural process. I draft the film through time, building it frame by frame. So the movies I make – especially in the beginning of my career when I was really into experimental cinema – instead of following a conventional narrative, are a series of stories, spread out over time, in a structure that gradually forms and grows... like a building.

When Ole and I first decided to collaborate on the Archipelago Cinema project in 2011, I knew him as the architect who had designed all these amazing, futuristic urban structures in Singapore and Beijing. So, when we started working, I was surprised to hear that his team

was looking at the local fishing community and its century-old traditions; how the fishermen constructed their rafts using ancient methods and natural materials, how they made their lobster traps and repurposed mosquito nets to catch the fish. From this thorough research of process, reuse, shape and material, Ole started to create his platform.

The concept was magical in the abstract; to make a cinema, floating out in the sea in this incredible cove, projecting films across the water, within giant walls of rock. Instead of rows of seats, little islands – a congregation of rafts as an auditorium. But the project was daunting in a practical sense; not only because of the scale of the structure, but also because of the natural factors and the unpredictable elemental conditions. Fluctuations in the wind conditions and also the changing levels of a tidal seawater. Because of the unique location, access was dreamlike also – first a boat to one spot, then a walk through a mangrove, and then onto another boat. Just getting there was like an adventure movie!

Scheeren and Weerasethakul collaborated on the 2011 Archipelago Cinema near Thailand's Kudu Island (opposite) and on the 2013 Mirage City Cinema for the Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE (below)

The experience of seeing a film on that screen – even with the huge rocks, the sky and vast horizon – was still somehow intimate. Movie-watching made more intense. The filmmaker's storytelling, synchronised and distilled into an extraordinary moment. Location, scale and dimension creating all kinds of emotion.

apichatpong weerasethakul: adventure architecture



You were aware of the sound of the waves, of the rock formations around you, of the stars above you, but this only added to a unique feeling that invited the audience to open their eyes, open up their hearts, to acknowledge the notion that we are all connected somehow.

The experience was multisensorial, immersive and transformative; of drifting and otherworldliness. With the audience members close by, the feelings were shared and communal. Being aware that the water level was changing added to the images playing out on the screen. You felt not only like observers, but also passengers, gently floating towards the horizon. And because the cinema itself was temporary and you would visit only once... after it was over, the experience became a fantastical memory.

It was so good, we decided to do it again, for the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2013. I worked with Ole on the Mirage City Cinema. Just as with the Archipelago Cinema project, we wanted to create a sense of disorientation on the approach – the intricate, jungle-like maze of the Sharjah medina's narrow alleys, solid buildings and interlocking volumes taking the cinemagoers to a city within the city. Inspired by locals' habits of taking to their rooftops, often with groups of friends, in the cool of the evenings, we made an auditorium as a courtyard of rooftops. A communal cinema where the images, framed by the darkness, projected on to the side of a building, formed a different kind of horizon. A place of fantasy, fiction and immensity... where you could lose yourself.



*

'The Interlace makes a major urban statement. It gives you a horizontal city with the interleaving of space and vegetation... It's a game-changer... something you'll remember and go, that was when somebody first did that thing, of these blocks in the sky, with gardens on them.'

peter cook:
game-changer





When Ute Meta Bauer was looking for a place to live in Singapore in 2013, she was initially resistant to the idea of a condominium. Yet there was something about The Interlace that intrigued the Hamburg native, who had just arrived in Singapore to take up her new post as founding director of the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, and professorship in the School of Art, Design and Media at Nanyang Technological University.

The Interlace sits on an eight-hectare estate, and comprises 31 six-storey blocks that look as if towers have been tipped onto their sides and then stacked, the resulting hexagonal pattern housing 1,040 apartments and a complex of piazzas, gardens, swimming pools, playgrounds and water features.

Bauer rented a two-bedroom apartment for herself – which she lived in for the next three years – and another two for her international artists-in-residence programme on the basis that The Interlace provided ‘an interesting contrast for the artists who would have the experience of living a very contemporary moment of Singapore’.

The DUO towers (above) and Interlace (opposite), in Singapore, both incorporate multilevel public gardens and vast landscaped plazas

You were initially very resistant to the idea of a modern condominium. What changed your mind?

I resisted because I thought it would be good to live in a historic building whose architecture was typical for Singapore, but after looking around, I realised that living in condominiums is actually very common

What were your first impressions?

You can see the building from Gillman Barracks, where our centre is located, so it was a presence from my first day at work. I was one of the first people to get the keys to move in. That was a very interesting period as we were fairly alone in the beginning besides the workers on-site and gardeners who were doing the landscaping. When the centre’s artists-in-residence moved in, we had barbecues downstairs without any lighting. It almost felt like we were squatting and we really enjoyed it. I soon learnt that Ole Scheeren had designed the project and I was quite interested to see how this huge complex would function as it slowly got occupied.

What is The Interlace’s most impressive feature?

It’s very unique. From the exterior, the building looks like a fortress. It has, I think, one of the largest number of apartments in Singapore and yet, it’s interesting how the architects managed to ensure that the apartments are integrated and oriented in such a way that they all have views of gardens, the city or the sea. I was on the 16th-floor with views of the harbour and our centre.

What was it like living there?

What was really interesting for me was the demographics of the residents – the locals, expatriates, small and large families, very diverse and all from different income brackets. But because of the multiplicity of the floor plans, it’s all mixed together. You might have a townhouse-type apartment on the ground floor, a studio in the middle and a penthouse at the top. And in the underground parking lots, you have very expensive cars next to bicycles.

Did it ever feel crowded?

Never. It helped that the architects found a way to spatially realise so much freedom. You never get the sense that you’re living in a place with a thousand units because there are so many open spaces and facilities like the numerous swimming pools, the barbecue pits, lotus ponds, tennis courts, karaoke room and the dog park. People could work in the library, get a snack from the café. It shows that you can live in a dense urban environment and still have privacy and not feel as if you’re constantly stepping on someone’s feet.

What other lessons can be drawn from The Interlace?

Even if you live in a small studio apartment, you have access to all the facilities that someone living in the penthouse does. There’s something very democratic about that. As someone who has worked in the architecture field, I think it’s so important that everybody living in a community should have the same quality of life.

**ute meta bauer:
democratic space**

Deyan Sudjic

A leading British author and architecture critic, Sudjic is the former director of London's Design Museum. The director of the 2002 Venice Architecture Biennale, he also edited *Domus* magazine in Milan. His most recent book is a biography of Stalin's architect, Boris Iofan.

Aric Chen

Chen became the general and artistic director of Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam in 2021. The American critic was previously curator for design and architecture at the M+ museum in Hong Kong, and curatorial director for Design Miami.

Joseph Giovannini

A Harvard-educated architect, writer and critic, Giovannini heads his own practice and has written for publications such as *The New York Times*. He is the author of *Architecture Unbound: A Century of the Disruptive Avant-Garde*, published in 2021.

Hans Ulrich Obrist

A prolific curator, editor and writer originally from Switzerland, Obrist has been artistic director at the Serpentine Galleries in London for many years. His projects include Manifesta 1, and 'Utopia Station' at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003.

Cao Fei

The winner of the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize in 2021, Cao is a Guangzhou-born artist known for her video, digital media and performance work that documents the transformation of contemporary China and its interaction with the West.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul

A renowned Thai film director and screenwriter, Weerasethakul won the 2010 Cannes Film Festival Palme d'Or with *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. His first English-language film, *Memoria*, released in 2021, is set in Colombia.

Peter Cook

Cook is a founding member of Archigram, the British architectural collective that embodied playful Futurism in the 1970s. A lecturer, writer and Royal Academician, he is currently in practice with Cook Haffer Architecture Platform.

Ute Meta Bauer

The founding director of the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore, Bauer was previously the artistic director of the Künstlerhaus in Stuttgart, and held posts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Royal College of Art, London.

Peter Weibel

Born in Odessa during the Soviet period, Weibel studied medicine and mathematics in Vienna, before making a career in experimental art in many forms. He took on a leadership role at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe in 1999.



Above, a detailed plan of the exhibition 'ole scheeren: spaces of life' at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, showing large-scale sculptures and the digital aspect of architecture

Peter Weibel, director of the ZKM, has curated the first comprehensive solo exhibition dedicated to Scheeren's work, in close cooperation with the German architect. The exhibition 'ole scheeren : spaces of life' spans three decades of Scheeren's career and includes well-known buildings such as The Interlace in Singapore, the Guardian Art Center in Beijing, and the Empire City towers in Ho Chi

Minh City. Also on show will be early works and artistic installations – such as the outdoor cinema series – to investigate how architecture shapes our spaces of life and creates a stage for people's narratives and experiences. Large-scale installations in the atria of the ZKM will create an exploratory and immersive environment.

peter weibel: spaces of life

The lives of people in the 21st century are impacted by fundamental global transformations. Digitisation, globalisation and the increasingly apparent effects of climate change are altering social coexistence on an unprecedented scale. Around the world, the widespread use of new media and digital technologies are changing traditional labour-based societies into flexible knowledge-based societies. Categories of space and time, and of privacy and working, are undergoing a radical redefinition. The identity of the individual and of societies at large is increasingly up for reconsideration, and new directions for the future of life on our planet are needed.

Against the backdrop of these challenges, and the turn towards ‘the terrestrial’ (Bruno Latour), the exhibition ‘ole scheeren : spaces of life’, at Karlsruhe’s ZKM Center, focuses on the question: How do we want to live?

Scheeren is one of the most influential German architects of our time. In particular, he became well-known for his spectacular skyscrapers and innovative housing projects in Asia. His work stands for complex, highly technological designs, which, despite their sometimes enormous dimensions, are always closely based on the needs of the human being. With his architecture, Scheeren seeks ‘to create stages for the lives of people’.

In this current era of the Anthropocene, numerous publications have appeared about the ‘uninhabitable planet’ (for instance, David Wallace-Wells’ 2019 *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*). It has become an urgent task for architects to create a new vision and manual for how to make Earth habitable again – a new understanding of architecture must confront a new

reality and go beyond the traditional definitions of typologies, where a building is understood as merely a building instead of a complex set of interdependent relationships and consequences.

Scheeren is just such an architect. His architecture is an experimental system, which breaks with centuries-old architectonic conventions like verticality and densification, because he knows that simply carrying on as before only aggravates the problems instead of solving them. In this sense, his projects are provocations. His buildings – sometimes horizontal even if vertical, scattered instead of concentrated – are examples of a ‘holobiontic’ breed of architecture (Lynn Margulis). This is design in a broader context, whereby the whole displays characteristics that the individual elements do not possess: the apartment is part of the building, and the building is part of the city, and the city, in turn, is part of society at large. All elements permeate and influence each other in ways that promote the fusion of democracy and of space as the design of social equality.

Scheeren’s architecture goes far beyond sustainability in its traditional sense: his research into new materials in respect of the protection of the environment always has a social and humane function. The division between ethics and aesthetics dissipates. His aesthetic solutions are the result of engaging with society and ecology. The beauty of his buildings is achieved by their viability. His buildings display life-like behaviour. His urban designs reach far beyond Buckminster Fuller’s *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1969), because Scheeren avoids the technical metaphor of the spaceship.

Scheeren is not an architect on a Space odyssey, but on an Earth odyssey. He wants to make Earth habitable. He does not design buildings as ‘machines for living’ like Le Corbusier, but builds social spaces, biotopes, places for living, for coming together, places for the community, for society itself. He opposes classical modernism’s reductionism (Mies van der Rohe’s ‘less is more’), his architectural designs are anarchitecture. His constructs are biomedia for living; their aesthetic is the poetry of knowledge. Scheeren applies holobiontic ideas in the sense of Alexander von Humboldt’s ‘everything is interconnected’, towards what he calls an ‘architecture as living organism’ in which all elements from humans to plants are actively involved, are fellow beings, are all cohabitants. His fiction is that of the lives of people on our planet. His architecture is a terrestrial manifesto.

