

# TANK

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YSL TRACING THE OUTLINE  
OF SHAPES TO COME  
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PLOT: THE SMART YOUNG 21ST-CENTURY  
ARCHITECTS WHO BELIEVE IN HAPPY ENDINGS

text by Stumon Basar



# what's the storey?





Maritime Youth House, Copenhagen  
photography by Mads Hilmer

Youth, the saying maintains, is wasted on the young; but not if your business is architecture and your name is PLOT. Within four years of coming together, and while still only in their late 20s, Julien de Smedt and Bjarke Ingels, the founders of Copenhagen-based PLOT, have managed to win a remarkable number of competitions, to build several critically and popularly received projects and to feature regularly on the academic lecture circuit. The pair's Maritime Youth House, built last year in Copenhagen, has been splashed on the pages of design magazines around the world with no little justification: with only a modest budget, PLOT's structure made straight bits of wood look like the tumultuous sea. A new hotel project in the same city takes the endless corridors inevitable in hotel design and spirals them up the entire building, creating repetition and difference. Their housing proposal for the otherwise anonymous Danish city of Vejle is a giant vision of inhabitable typography: five blocks, each one based on one of the letters in the city's name. At this urban scale, their literal-minded, one-line idea takes on a graceful, purposeful charm.

In PLOT's mission statement, the duo claim that they got together "to develop an architectural practice that turns intense research and analysis of practical as well as theoretical issues into the driving forces of design." Which goes some way to explaining such grand designs, but makes them sound rather more solemn than they are.

Ingels and de Smedt have a lot to smile about. At last year's Architecture Biennale in Venice, they walked away with a prestigious special award for best concert hall design – an admirable feat, especially given that their competitors were architectural goliaths often twice their age. Their hard-grafting apprenticeships (they formerly worked at famed offices such as OMA and Diller + Scofidio) are paying off now. **PLOT is being saluted as new generation newness that doesn't dream in paper models or labyrinths of theory, but intends to build. And build big.**

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Grand ideologies rose (and, arguably, fell) in the 20th century, and – so obviously that it barely needs restating – the giants of cultural production during the 20th century were invariably ideologues too. Notions of the good, the beautiful and the true were coloured by distinct belief systems. Ideologies proffered solutions for a better world and their advocates often disseminated them with zeal reminiscent of the religious conviction they saw themselves as replacing. Artists, writers, designers and scientists felt an urgent obligation to participate in the erasure and rewriting of the world. Utopias were thought to be within reach, but those utopias needed to be given shape, so architects became self-appointed emissaries of idealised futures whose likes had not been seen since the Renaissance.

From our privileged 21st century rear-view mirror we can now wag our fingers, sigh and bemoan those foolhardy dreamers who believed so much and yet left us with so little – from Corbusier razing Paris and starting again with concrete hamster-cage housing somehow intended to improve our lot to John and Yoko staying in bed to save the world from war. These days, such musing on human perfectibility is more commonly seen as meddling and misguided. Those coming of age now seem more inclined to reject such grand and optimistic aspirations: the world is fucked anyway, their attitude says, so tonight, let's just dance.

At least, I sometimes project such sybaritic brutishness onto the youth of today. In private moments of despair, I imagine that the "kids" are so safely distanced from the 20th century that they don't feel any obligation to pick up the baton – whatever that may be – and prepare it for the next generations. They are liberated from the burden of inheritance and revel in that freedom. Instead of ideological struggles and master narratives, one detects a free-for-all in which morals and values are constructed on an individual, temporary, pragmatic basis.

To test my theory that theory matters less today than it did during the last century, I decide to ask PLOT. What strikes me about the pair is not so much the language of their finished proposals (friendly, smart and elegant versions of function determining form), but the air of angst-free abandon their practice promotes. Starchitects have famously employed David Copperfield-like props and make-up to appear more mysterious and otherworldly than mere mortals. Architecture magazines are full of architects' poses, pontifications and impenetrable ponderings on Very Important Things. Ingels and de Smedt strike no such melancholic pose. In fact, they smile a lot. As does their beaming, joyous architecture.

First off, I ask what drives them, and offer a list of clichés to choose from. (In keeping with their tradition of polished, collective pronouncements, the duo chooses to deal with my enquiries in jointly composed e-mail responses.) In their ranking of motivations, the dreaded "style" comes last. "Fame" trails a lowly sixth. And, not surprisingly, "love," "curiosity" and "changing the world into a better place" come third, second and first respectively. This suggests that noble social motives are also in operation in this duo's playful work. Still, I wonder if it is a fake smile that they wear or if the permanently perfect blue of their computer renderings is actually a true expression of their outlook. "At our 'Seven New Denmark' submission, which envisaged our ideas on practical utopias, the bit that most people thought was really radical was our sense of optimism," they respond. "If you are enthusiastic about the future, people think you are crazy!"

Perhaps the fallout of the 20th century was a suspicion of anyone proclaiming brighter, better futures. If they couldn't deliver back then, why should architects be able to do so now? PLOT thinks we have been wallowing in a fear of the future since the mid-1970s, excavating nostalgic models and styles from the past to appease our sense of unease about the new. They also feel, however, that things are changing; that people are now prepared to invest in and imagine a future that hasn't happened yet. They explain, "Perhaps a new pragmatic rigour mixed with a light-

hearted freedom to choose your design criteria from project to project has rescued architecture from obscurity. She is re-appointed as the midwife in the continuous birthing of the world!" It's an oblique personification of architecture, but its essence is positive, aligning design with life and not with endings and apocalypse.

PLOT starts a project by consolidating the functional needs of a building, drawing it up as a two- and then three-dimensional diagram, which is then clad, solidified or scaled up to actual size. And they are quite happy to let us all in on the process. Where is the anxiety, where is the authorial doubt? Where is the wizard's curtain? "Designing consists of excess and selection. We have to make more statements, test more models, assume more givens and proclaim more urgency that can possibly survive. The doubts, the anxieties and the wrongness are all there in the archive freak show of the abortions that never made it to the end," they admit. Tortured artists PLOT certainly aren't. Nor do they want to exude the impression that difficulty is an intrinsic part of creativity. "We don't have an abstract ideology. Just a burning desire to do things."

Part of PLOT's appeal lies in its relationship to comedy. Good comedy looks infinitely effortless, but is the result of careful crafting. Traditionally, comedy develops a situation, while the punchline – that closing quip that ties incongruous items together in an irruption of illogical logic – provides denouement. One-liners, however, operate quite differently; the one-liner is premise, elaboration and quip in one hilariously terse package. It's self-sufficient.

PLOT's architecture forgoes the obligation of the historical baton and instead performs a hybrid operation: a kind of one-line punchline. PLOT's end product works as a visual one-liner that appeals to our appreciation of beauty, grace and innovation. But the apparent simplicity of the end product is the result of a brutally rational interpretation of how spaces are, and might be, used. The distance between premise and delivery looks ruthlessly short and in this way it hovers between the one-liner and the traditional narrative punchline. "Who wants to hear endless stories of interdisciplinary collaborations and participatory stories without a plot or a punchline? Brilliant theories need evidence to prove that they are brilliant."

At this point, I am in perilous danger of over-theorising the comedic logic of PLOT's work, and we all know what happens when comedy is subject to excess analysis. You stop laughing. As a parting thought, I ask PLOT if they think that architects can change the world as much as, say, Bono might be able to. "Bono can represent a situation – he can call attention to a situation. Architecture can intervene – and literally change the world," they say. "Architecture is the capacity to plan and produce our surroundings so they fit our lives. In this way architects can change the world more directly than even Bono can." Fighting talk indeed – talk that suggests this generation of designers, though unburdened by the responsibility of being territorially ideological, still care. Maybe they just want to care without the big words, without the footnotes and citations and with a greater sense of wit. The last thing they tell me is the closest they come to modernist-style sloganeering. "Where architects are – everything is possible." Post-post-modern, post-junk-space and after the end of the end of the world, maybe architects are rediscovering the plot after all.

## FLASH FICTION 7

Untitled

By Emily Kuehn

There's a law that airplanes can't fly over particular high-population-density areas because of the risk that they will crash and kill huge amounts of people – colleges are one of these areas. The only way to catch a plane in violation of this, though, is to get a picture of it that includes the plane's number, and then take it to aviation authorities, who will then fine them – it's a long process. Anyway, one weekend we needed whiskey money, so Emily dressed in a mechanic uniform, got me to drive her to Wal-Mart (where she stole a bunch of film) and then over to the private airfield near campus. She walked up to pilots who were leaving their planes, asked them if they were aware of the rule, and then offered them the film for \$20. "Less than your license," she'd say.



Hotel, Copenhagen