

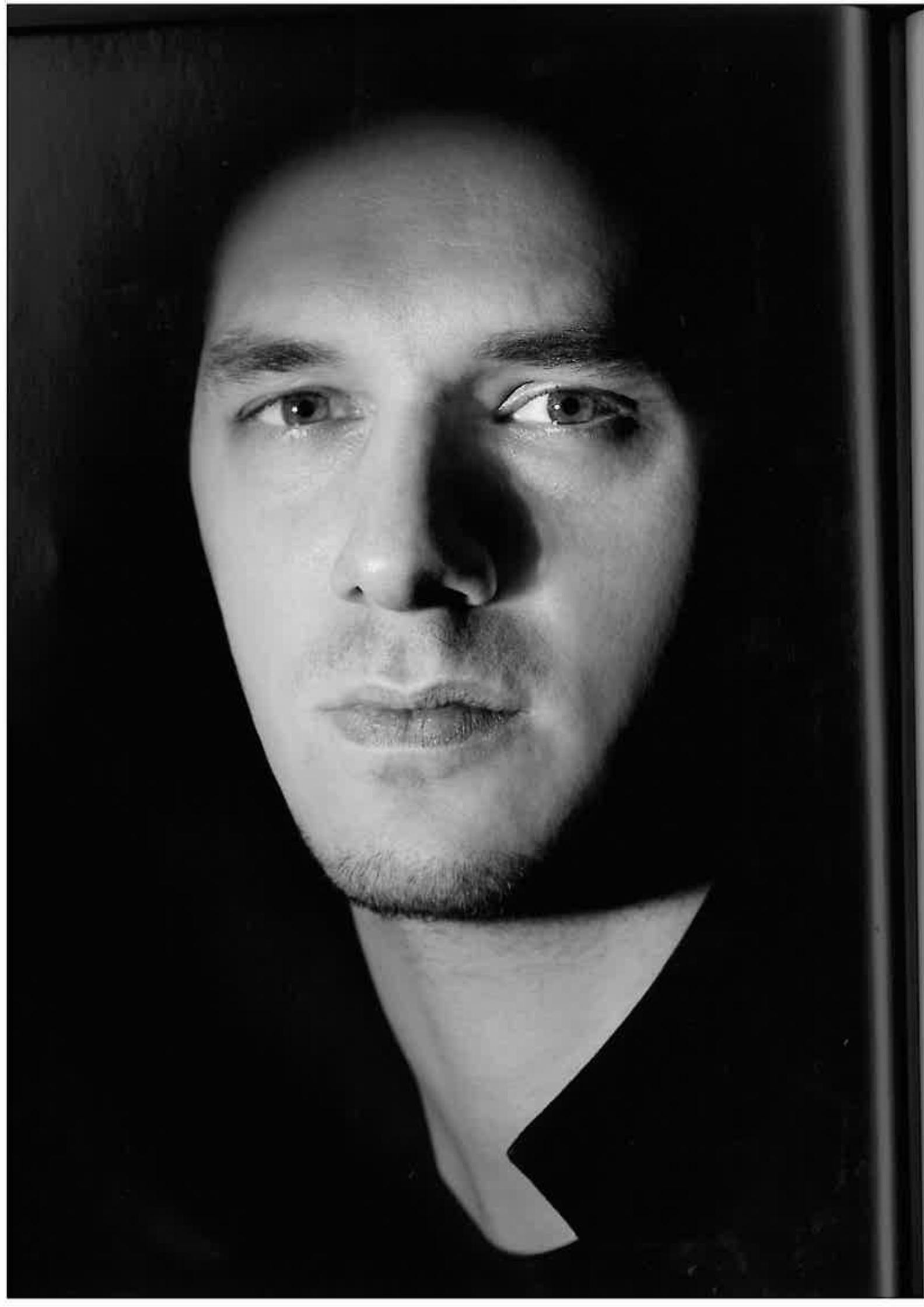
# build



DAS ARCHITEKTEN-MAGAZIN

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Patrik Schumacher  
Bjarke Ingels  
Julien de Smedt  
Hans Ulrich Obrist  
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**ZUKUNFT**



# OPPOSITES AT THE SAME TIME

**Ralf F. Broekman and Olaf Winkler in conversation with Julien de Smedt**

**Julien, you work on all levels from furniture objects to high rise. Coping with these different scales, how important is an interdisciplinary approach to your work?**

Scale span is one way to differentiate our practice, but interdisciplinarity goes far beyond that. We always like to think that architecture is not the only answer to a given condition, problem, question. Of course we are architects and our core production occurs within the scale of space, though lately our reflections have taken us to extremes both in the macro scale, where space is no longer perceivable, and to the micro scale, or actually the pixel scale, where the unit is not defined in space measure but in pixels.

**Describing your working philosophy, you emphasize the meaning of research in theoretical as well as practical terms. Would you conceive this simply as a necessity within the architect's work of today, or does it include the conscious redefinition of the working field of the architect?**

I think it's both. I always like to say that my speciality is not to be specialised. What I mean by that is that when you don't know about something you ask more questions, dig deeper, experiment harder. And you try to build up your own opinion about the topic. It's exhilarating out of the pure feeling of discovery, but it's also very opportunist and mathematic: how can you compete against specialists and experts when you cannot hide behind the cover of your signature brand architecture and have to face the reality of a given unknown topic? You study.

**Does the notion of avant-garde matter to you? If so, would you be willing to define it more precisely?**

Actually it doesn't really matter to me... but I'll explain why. Somehow I think avant-garde has always referred to a small group of ferocious, often young, "misunderstood" and angry man claiming a belief towards a world that didn't seem to care about that new found truth. Often this belief is articulated as "anti" or against the known values. I believe much more in evolution. I believe the past and the present are our best tools to work out a more interesting future. I believe we need to learn from mistakes and from successes. Copy the good and correct the wrong...

**You studied architecture in three different European countries and the US, are in the process of opening a second office in Belgium, and are currently working on projects in regions with such differing cultural backgrounds as e.g. Germany, the US or**

**the Far East. How does the simultaneity of these backgrounds influence your work?**

Diversity is inevitable. It's also overrated. There's a bit of everything in everything and as long as you don't abuse it there won't be an overdose. That also means that the smaller you bite of the more variety of ingredients, the less chance you'll get to be fed up... but the less you'll be able to taste the nuances. After running projects in Denmark and Germany for quite a few years I've just opened a branch in my hometown, Brussels, to run our European projects. I'm extremely excited about that since I left Belgium some twelve years ago. The situation has drastically changed since then and I am very interested in the new "order". Of course I'm also returning in a state of complete political collapse but politics have never been the strength of Belgians – we are stupid enough to hate our language differences while they have forged our cultural stand vis-à-vis our immediate and imposing neighbours... Altogether I see myself as truly European, being born of a French dad and a Belgian mother, and having worked pretty much everywhere in Europe since I started my own practice in 2001.

**Is being a young architect an important category for you? To which extent do subcultural practices play a role in taking a clear stance on cultural (mass) phenomena?**

New Holmenkollen Ski Jump, Oslo,  
international competition 2007, 1st prize; completion 2010



jds/julien de smedt architects



SILO, 900 apartments, museum and public space, ongoing project (top)  
 Louis Poulsen Lighting Showcase, Frankfurt, 2006 (above)  
 Park Towers, research project, 2007 (r.)

At the very beginning of my career I thought my age was rather a burden. I was 25 when I started my first company, PLOT, in a business where "young architect awards" were given to people around 50. And I wasn't into faking grey hair or wearing ties... actually quite the opposite. I had just gotten my diploma from London and fled from a job in New York for Rem Koolhaas, so I was wearing colourful t-shirts, funky sneakers and caps. Not exactly the looks of someone you'd give a 100 mio. Euros commission. But thanks for us we had no client so all we did was entering competitions, which we more or less all won...

**You lately won the international competition for the new ski jump for the Holmenkollen – a building which will gain meaning as an icon for Oslo or even Norway. Does the need for – not only built – icons grow in a more and more complex and pluralistic society?**

I don't think society is more complex – it always was complex. The difference now is that for the first time we discuss this issue in opposition or comparison to something unified: Europe. Europe has awakened the fear of disappearance of "sub"-cultures. Regions. Cities. Even villages. A paradoxical result of that is the over-saturated market of architectural icons. To stand out, every country, region, city

or billionaire has decided to erect their personal architectural masterpiece in the long line of stable identity crystallisation enunciated by the pyramids. Those new cultural tombs come today in the names of Libeskind, Gehry, Nouvel and co. but don't quite manage to fulfil their mandate of revealing and uplifting the particularities and diversities of their commissioners. Why's that, one might ask. I'll take the example of the ski jump in Oslo: of all projects, this one is definitely one that screams for iconographic signature architecture. Because of that and because it was put up as an international anonymous bid we decided to enter the competition. I believe the real reason we won the competition is because we've managed to do two opposite things at the same time: to create an icon for Oslo and the region of course – but mostly because we dealt with the project's real soul which lies in between two passions: one for the sport discipline and the other for the city of Oslo. Architecturally we proposed a very efficient and very stripped down ski jump that would celebrate the discipline in its simple beauty and perfection. Urbanistically we proposed a sign that would glow and extend to the sky to be the beacon of Oslo and it's region while at the same time offer a large and open terrace at its very top to be able to look upon Oslo and its region from the highest point of all. It was a matter of dialogue. From Oslo to Holmenkollen and back.

**Your work is dealing with the complexity of current urban concepts. In the overall appearance as well as in the inner organisation of each design itself, it is doing so by clearly introducing a notion of individuality. In how far can this be read as a political statement? Do you think it is important for architects to act politically?**

There's very little politics left today. To be political is to be opportunist or, like the expression says, to be "politically correct" is to be opportunist... Politics are overruled by economics. All around Europe you see political parties missing on majority making alliances and vote trades to access government's leadership. So where do we stand as architects in this mess? I will always remember this advice from my uncle who said that as an architect one should never be politically partial... After all, the Casa del fascio is a beautiful and acclaimed modernist building. And a lot of people see Albert Speer's only sin to have been working for Hitler (another politically correct statement) but being in fact a great architect.

[www.jdsarchitects.com](http://www.jdsarchitects.com)

**Julien de Smedt, born 1975 in Brussels, Belgium, studied architecture in Brussels, Paris, Los Angeles and in London. In 2001, he was co-founder of the office PLOT together with Bjarke Ingels, which quickly gained international reputation and received a number of international awards. In 2006, Julien de Smedt founded the office Julien de Smedt Architects (JDS) in Copenhagen.**

